# Rati-Līlā

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AN INTERPRETATION OF THE TANTRIC IMAGERY OF THE TEMPLES OF NEPAL

GIUSEPPE TUCCI

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# PUBLISHER'S NOTE

*Since the publication in 1962 of* Kama Kala, *the first volume in the series "Unknown Treasures" which was acclaimed by the international press for its audacious beauty, Nagel Publishers have continued to unveil the secrets of the erotic art created by the civilisations of the world.* Eros Kalos, Roma, Amor, Shunga, Checan *and* Sarv é Naz *have thus successively revealed, under the guidance of leading authorities, the artistic manifestations of the erotic sense of the Greek, Roman, Japanese, Peruvian and Persian peoples.*

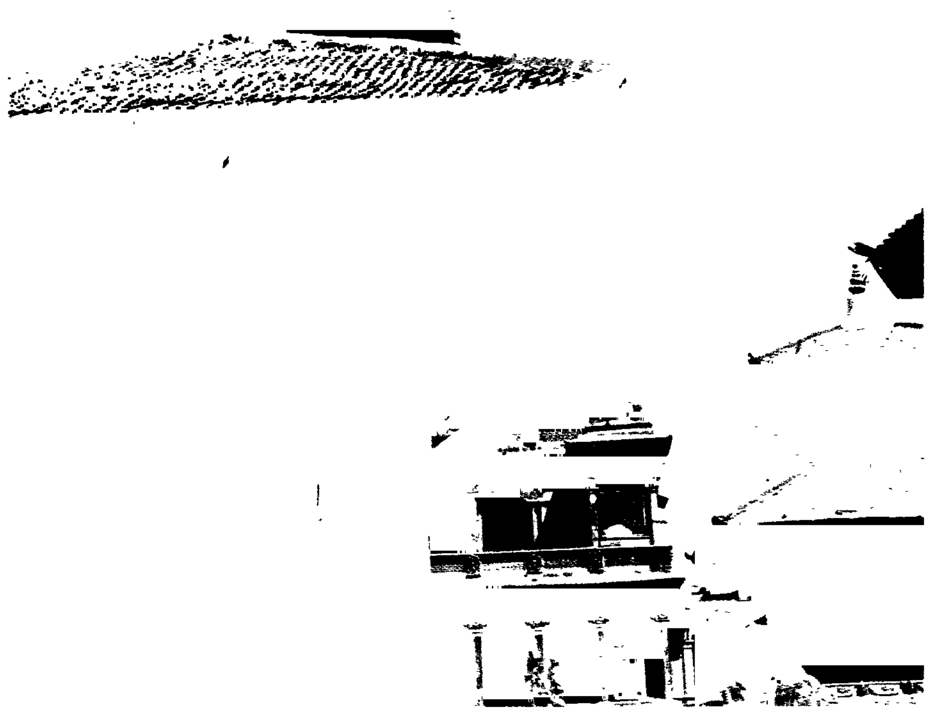
*A further area of unknown territory is now opened up with this seventh volume in the series,* Rati-Līlā, *which is concerned with the erotic imagery of the temples of Nepal. Under a title which to some readers might appear frivolous — for "Rati-Līlā" means "the sports of love" — Professor Giuseppe Tucci, of the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East in Rome, initiates us into the esoteric mysteries of Tantric thought in a luminous analysis which is the product of over twenty-five years of uninterrupted contact with the civilisation of Nepal. We should like to express our sincere gratitude for his ready helpfulness throughout the preparation of this work.*

*The reader will be struck at once by the exotic originality and the extraordinary humour shown in these erotic creations by the artists of Nepal. To photograph these works entailed an expedition lasting more than two months, and the 230 illustrations presented in this volume were selected from over a thousand. This is an indication of the care that has gone to the making of this book, for the greater pleasure of readers whose appreciation of art comprehends all the varied manifestations of the nature of man.*

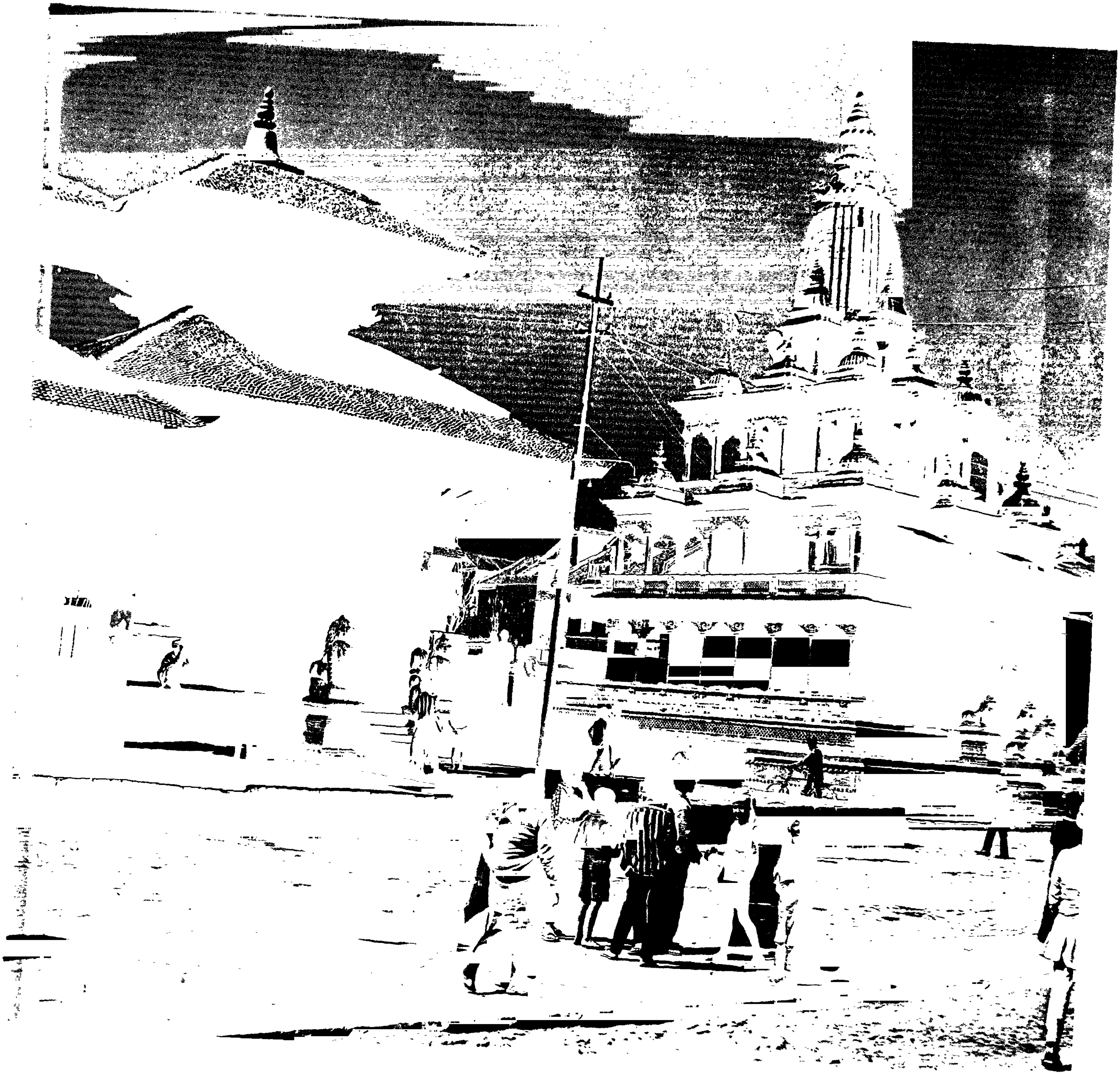
# I

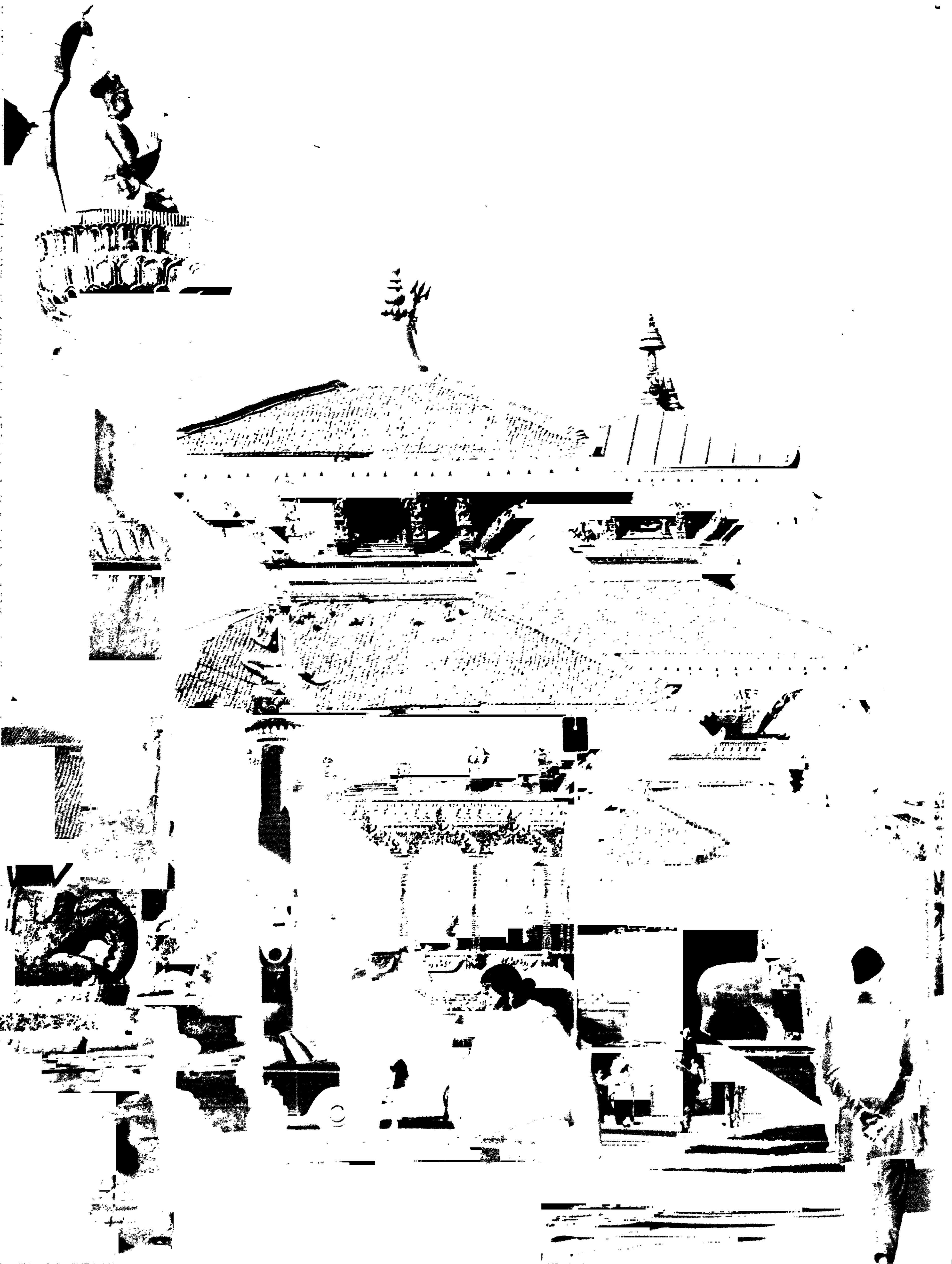
Although Nepal preserved the heritage of its complex ethnic origins, setting out on a slow and gradual process of unification in the time of Prithivī Narayan, the founder of the Gurkha hegemony, from 1768 onwards, it could not escape the influence of India and its social and religious culture. On all the variety of popular beliefs, loose and unsystematic as they were, peculiar to each of the various racial groups living in the country—Newari, Magar, Gurung, Limbu, Bhotia, etc.—were superimposed two of the dominant religious currents of India, Buddhism and Hinduism, each of them represented by a number of different sects and schools. Nepal produced some outstanding exponents of Buddhist thought, deeply versed in the subtleties of dogmatics and logic, many of whom found disciples in Tibet; but at the end of the day it was the Tantric sects which established themselves and prevailed. Even the famous *stūpas* of Svayambhūnāth and Bodhnāth and other buildings of lesser importance, traditionally regarded as reflecting Buddhist ideas of the time of Aśoka (3rd century B.C.), are now seen to be imbued with an essentially Tantric atmosphere; and in the immense proliferation of sculpture with which the piety of generations of pilgrims has covered them we can see mainly the imprint of the Buddhism of the Great Vehicle and the Diamond Vehicle.

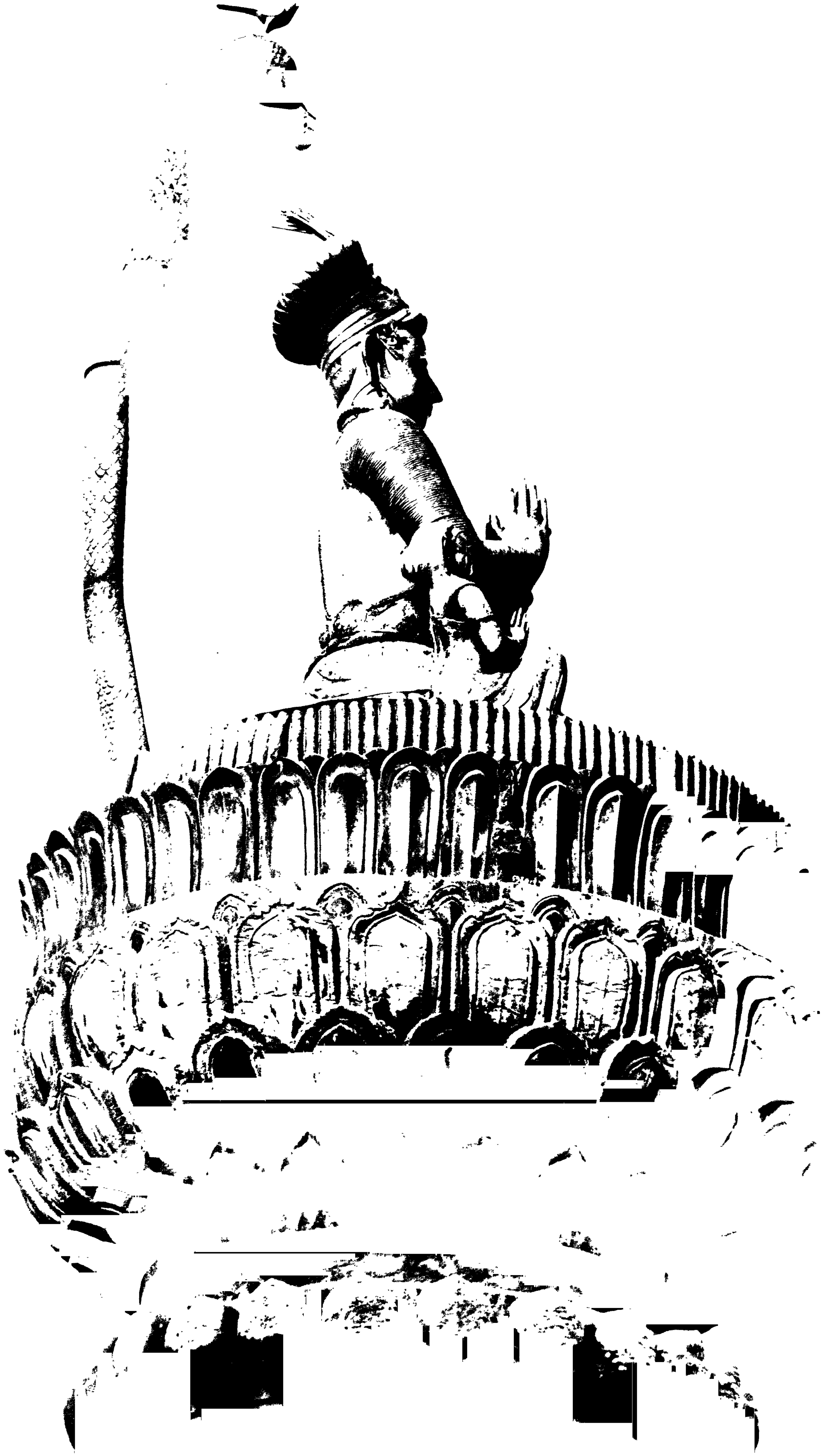
When Buddhism began to decline in India it maintained itself in Nepal, safe from the vicissitudes to which the sub-continent was exposed, and indeed grew in strength as a result of its regular contact both with the adepts driven by the Moslem invasions to seek refuge and safety in Nepal and with Tibet, where Buddhism had in the meantime established itself. Thus in a sense Nepal maintained

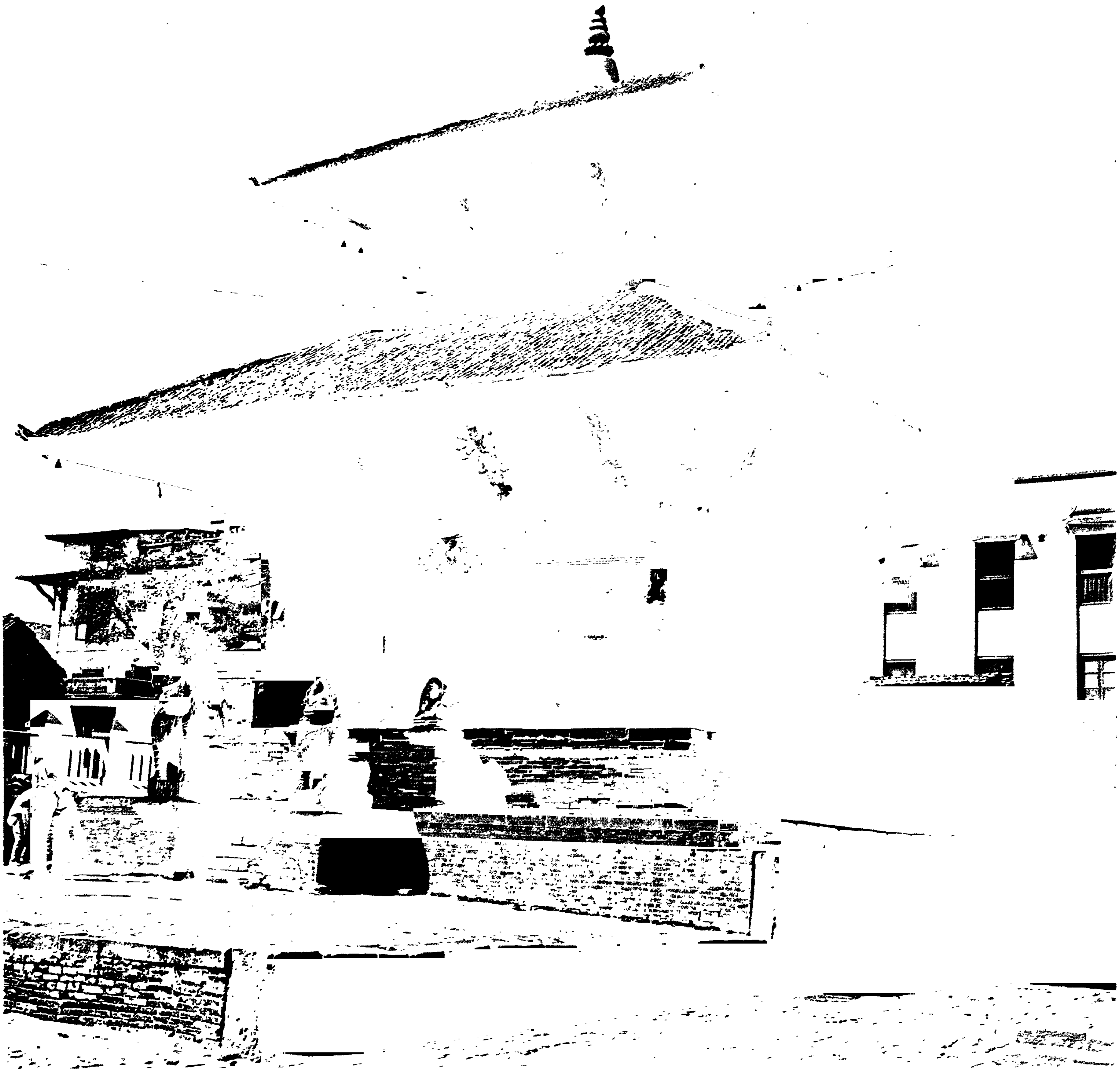


and developed the traditions of India. The original monastic character of Buddhism, however, now began to disappear. The old conventual community was replaced by the community of the *banre* (literally, the "worthy") and the higher order—still, however, originating from the same class—of the *vajrācāryas* or "diamond masters". Perhaps on the model of the Brahmans and as a result of the increasing influence of India, they were not vowed to celibacy, as the old rules required: they were permitted to marry, and the office of *vajrācārya* was usually hereditary. Eventually each family of *vajrācāryas* became responsible for a monastery *(vihāra)*, with a temple or chapel which in course of time grew into a centre of attraction for Nepalese and Tibetan pilgrims. It was the *vajrācārya*'s special function to perform the various ceremonies of which ordinary people might stand in need—to carry out the rites proper to a birth, a marriage or a death, to cast horoscopes, to celebrate rituals









designed to ward off real or imaginary calamities, to cure illness by the invocation of divine forces, to ensure the happy rebirth of the dead. No doubt some of these *vajrācāryas* kept alive the ancient Buddhist culture; some of them were considerable scholars or writers, or helped to hand on to posterity works which would not otherwise have survived the centuries. But in general they fell increasingly under the influence of Tantric thought, and thus promoted the diffusion of a Buddhism of a peculiarly esoteric and magical cast and the predominance of an empty and ritualistic ceremonial.

In the spread of Hinduism all its principal schools were represented: the school centred on the cult of Śiva, who in his form Paśupati became the protector of the whole country; the less numerous sects which regarded Viṣṇu as the supreme god; and others dominated by the concept of the *śakti*, the "power", the "Great Mother", through whom Śiva himself becomes active and without whom he is inert (Śava—Śiva = Śiva— "corpse"). Still other forms revolved round the cult of Ganeśa, whose image, with an elephant's head and an obese body, is so frequently found in temples and by the roadside. In the iconography of all these schools, both Buddhist and Hindu, the gods are frequently depicted in company with, or coupled with, their own *śakti*. The consort or "mother" figure of Tantric Buddhism and the *śakti* of the Hindu schools exemplify the development of the concept of woman as power, and the omnipresence of the god's inexhaustible creative or liberating force. In Śaivism this power, this *dynamis*, is threefold, covering the power of will, the power of wisdom and the power of action. The universe is conceived as a creature born of the embrace of divine couples, or of the division of a first principle into a "self" and an "other than self" through the intervention of the *śakti* as an emanation of a conscious Being. Moreover in the villages, where these theophanies could not be interpreted according to the theosophical conceptions introduced by the learned schools, the primitive religious forms which still survived came into their own during the seasonal festivals designed to promote the generative forces of nature, or were preserved in certain orgiastic rites which in a sense celebrated a return to the origins of creation and regularly led to a momentary suspension of the ordinary rules of social life.

Accordingly sexual relationships were not merely the result of a sudden surge of desire but had their proper place in a specific cosmological conception and in a ritual designed to stimulate the forces of nature, to ensure the fruitfulness of the earth, and to ward off the danger of a barrenness which



would be tantamount to death. This is why the representation of the male and female sexual organs was from the earliest times an essential element in popular religious iconography: the *liṅga* (male organ) and the *yoni* (female organ), or the male organ within the female organ, symbolised the act which created the world, the eternal cycle of reproduction without which nothing would exist. This idea dominates much of the religion of India—and not only of India—and is firmly attested from the Mohenjo-daro period (3rd millennium B.C.) onwards.

## II

One of the tutelary goddesses of Nepal is Guhyeśvarī, to whom one of the most important temples in the country is dedicated. Guhyeśvarī means "the lady of the secret"; and by "secret" we are to understand not only the esoteric features involved in the cult of the goddess but also, more specifically, her genital organs. According to the myth her father Dakṣa cruelly offended her husband Śiva by appearing uninvited, in the forbidding guise of an ascetic, at a sacrifice he was performing in presence of all the gods. Thereupon the goddess, unable to endure the affront, killed herself; and Śiva, beside himself with grief, snatched his wife's body from the pyre and carried her on his shoulders to Mount Kailāsa, the sacred mountain which is mirrored in the celestial waters of Lake Manasarovar in the heart of the Himalayas. On the way, however, parts of her broken

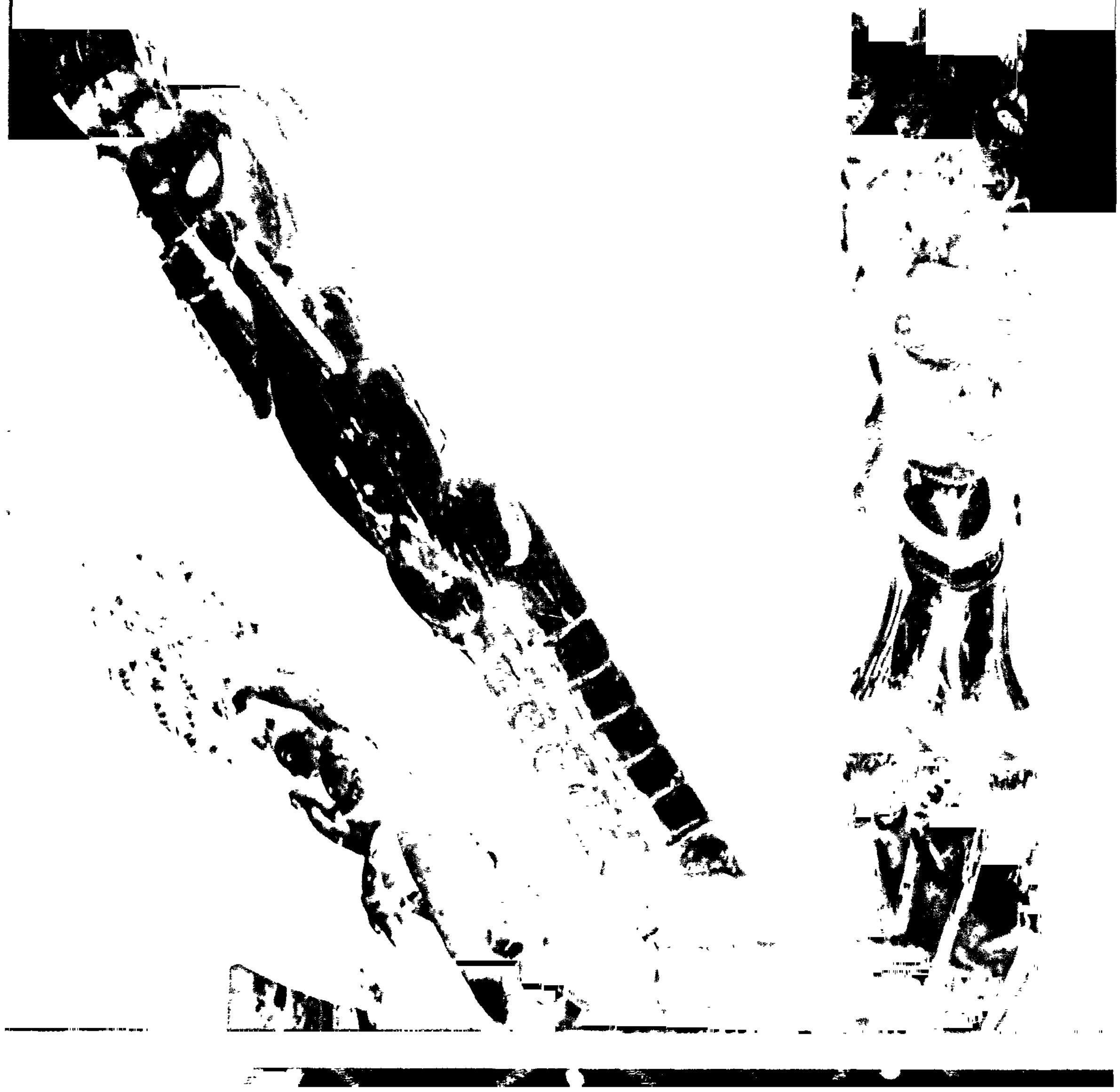


body fell off, sanctifying the places where they fell and marking out a route which pilgrims were to follow for thousands of years. On the precise spot where her sexual organ fell to earth the temple of Guhyeśvarī was built. The goddess (Devī), the *śakti,* is the *yoni* or *bhaga,* and is also referred to bluntly as the vulva *(bhagākhyā).*

The counterpart of the *yoni,* the goddess's sexual organ, is the *liṅga,* the virile member of Śiva, who is accordingly also known as "he who has the form of a *liṅga*" *(liṅgamūrti).* From the time of the Licchavi dynasty (c. 400–750 A.D.), the first dynasty in Nepal for which we have epigraphic evidence, *liṅgas* in stone and other materials were erected by kings and by private citizens for the veneration of the faithful and of passers-by in temples and other places. The best known of these is preserved in the famous sanctuary of Paśupati, Paśupatināth. On top of the *liṅga* there are four faces *(caturmukhaliṅga),* and attached to it are four pairs of hands. The whole thing represents the five aspects of Śiva: the centre is aniconic, signifying that the divine essence is undefinable.

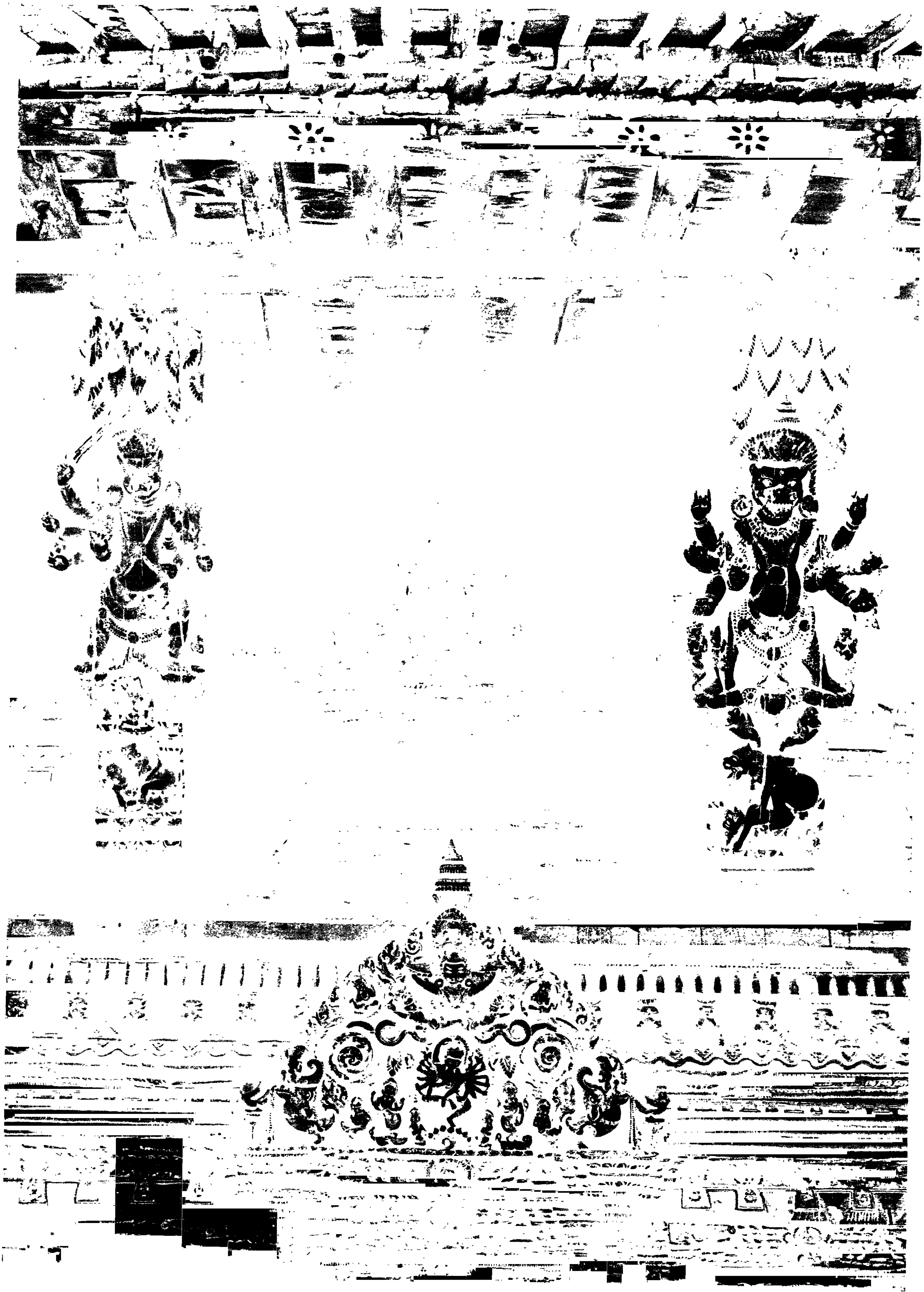
The word *liṅga* can also be taken in the sense of "sign" or "symbol", but even then the other meaning remains: " The sign of masculinity, the distinctive feature of a man, is the sign *(liṅga)* of Sadāśiva" (*Ajitāgama,* III, 1, 2). In other texts we are told quite unequivocally that the *liṅga* is, properly, the male organ (*Jñānakārikā,* III, 8).

Nevertheless the *liṅga* is not to be interpreted solely in the literal sense, even when it is represented in a realistic form—as it is, for instance, in the famous temple of Gudimallam. With the development of speculation it became something more. It took on, for example, the symbolism of the mountain which is *axis mundi;* for Śiva was also the god of the mountain. Above all, however, it was thought of as the symbol of the plenitude or rather the realisation of the divinity, the universe in its perpetual cycle of creation and dissolution, and the infinite space-time complex in which this cycle is accomplished. Moreover, by the assimilation of macrocosm and microcosm which is normal in these perceptions, the *liṅga* is identified with the lotus flower which is imagined as being on top of Śiva's head, the immaculate lotus from which all things flow and to which all things return (*Kaulajñānanirṇaya,* III, 9–10). It is also the principle of immobility, the sound which does not vibrate *(śabdabrahman),* the potential sound which is the basis of all sounds and consequently of all created things; for all creation is preceded by an idea, and an idea is at the same time a sound. (There is no idea which is not also a word, even though it may not be pronounced; and every word is an expression

















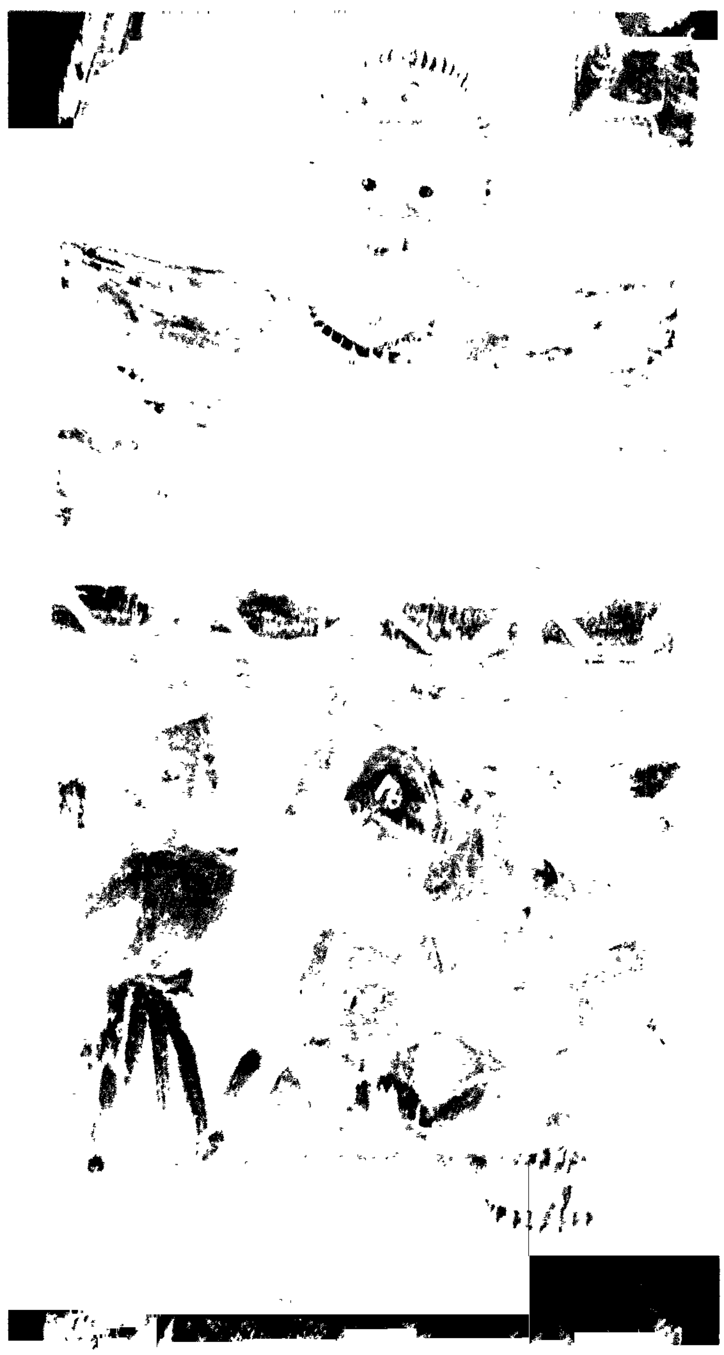




















in sound of an idea). Since Śiva is the motionless origin which contains power imprisoned within itself, and since the Mother is power in operation, there is a necessary relationship between the *liṅga* and the *yoni:* one is not conceivable without the other. The fusion of the two constitutes a return to the primal uncreated-creator, to the androgyne which is found, explicitly or implicitly, in the first glimmerings of Indian speculative thought: Ardhanarīśvara, "half man, half woman", the primal androgyne, an emanation of Brahmā, which divides itself into man (the right-hand part) and woman (the left-hand part). It is immaterial that in the eyes of the Śaivite sects this division did not emanate from Brahmā but was conceived by Śiva.

In Puranic literature (from Purāṇa, a massive encyclopaedia of Hinduism) the *liṅga* is an element of fundamental importance, honoured by gods and men. Thus Pārvatī erects a *liṅga* in the bed of the River Vegavatī and worships it religiously every day. Before journeying to Laṅkā to free Sitā from the power of the demon Rāvana, Rāma worships the *liṅga* of Śiva, still known today as Setabandhu Rāmeśvara. The creation of the world is likened to an emission of semen, the term *visarga* being used in both cases. Brahmā, it is said, pled with Śaṅkara (Śiva) not to create, whereupon the latter hid himself under the waters and nothing more was born. Then Brahmā begot Prājāpati, who was the origin of all created things and of the world. But when Śaṅkara emerged from the waters and saw all that had been





created he cut off his *liṅga*—since there was no longer any need for an act of creation by him—and observed a long period of asceticism.

Great numbers of *liṅgas* are to be seen both in Śaivite temples and in the open, in both town and country. Some of them are credited with an origin which is more than human: so, for example, the famous "twelve luminous *liṅgas*" *(Jyotir-liṅga)*, which became places of pilgrimage recommended by the sacred texts of India as a valuable means of elevation. It is necessary to worship the *liṅgas* in due form: they must be washed with cow's milk, curds, butter, honey, treacle, camphorated water, and so on. The object is clear: by worshipping the symbol the worshipper is led to meditate on what it stands for. As a well-known verse says: "As an insect becomes a bee by living with a bee, so a man becomes Śiva through continuous contact with him."

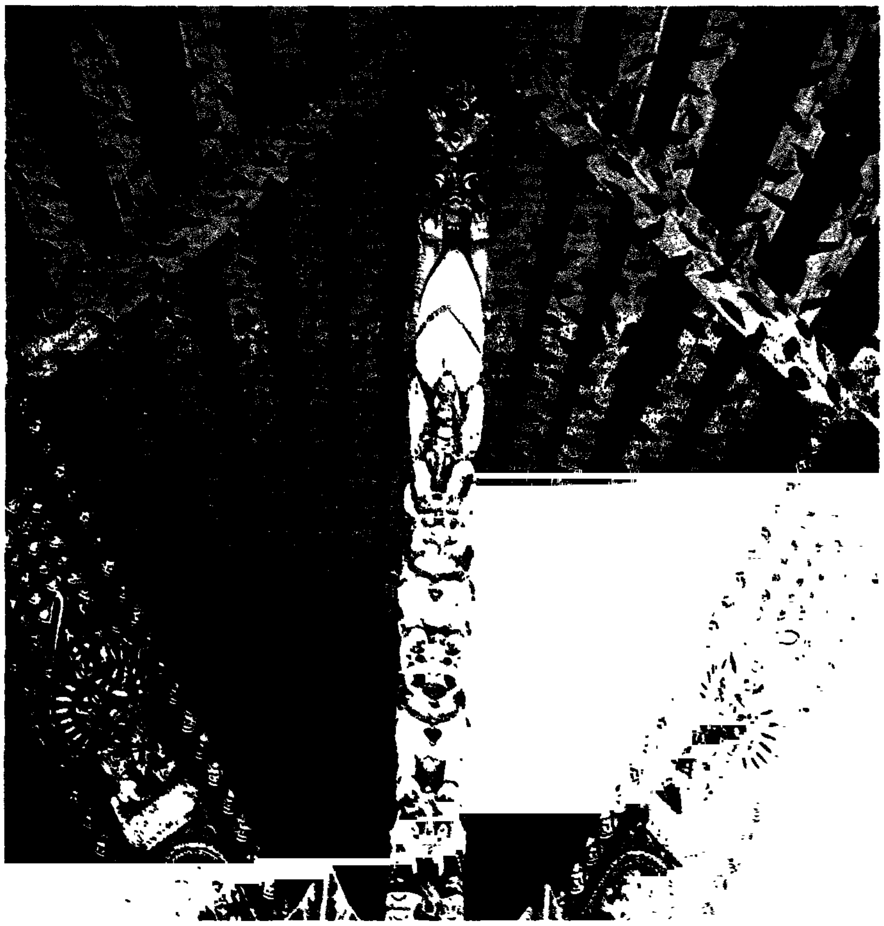
Śiva is frequently depicted with his wife Pārvatī on his knees, embracing her. Sometimes, too, he is represented as *urdhva-liṅga (penis erectus)* to

symbolise the power of generation, perpetually ready though not yet consummated, or perhaps to indicate the god's mastery of his senses which makes him the supreme ascetic.

There thus grew up a school known as the cult of the Liṅgayats, centred on the worship of the *Liṅga-Śiva.* The members of this sect, which was particularly popular in southern India, worshipped the *liṅga* because the *liṅga* was Śiva, and bore witness to their faith by carrying an image of the *liṅga* round their necks and on their heads. During the act of worship this was held in the left hand, thus magically transforming it into an altar. The presence of this *liṅga* purified whoever carried it: even a woman during her monthly periods, when she was regarded as impure and shunned by all, ceased to be considered unclean as the Brahmanic law required.

The *liṅga* in its prime manifestation as a symbol of the creative omnipotence of Śiva plays a part in the disputes between Brahmā and Viṣṇu, each of whom claims to be the creator of the world. Brahmā finds Viṣṇu lying on the cosmic waters, wakens him and asks him who he is. Viṣṇu replies that he is the begetter of the world and adopts an arrogant tone with his rival, who also asserts his position as the author of the universe. While the argument is proceeding a flaming *liṅga* appears in the sky, and neither of the divine contenders can see either its beginning or its end. Then they hear the sound of the sacred syllable *Om* descending from the sky and see high above them Maheśvara (another of Śiva's names), shining with dazzling brilliance like a flawless crystal: whereupon the rivals, realising the vanity of their own claims, render homage to the greatest

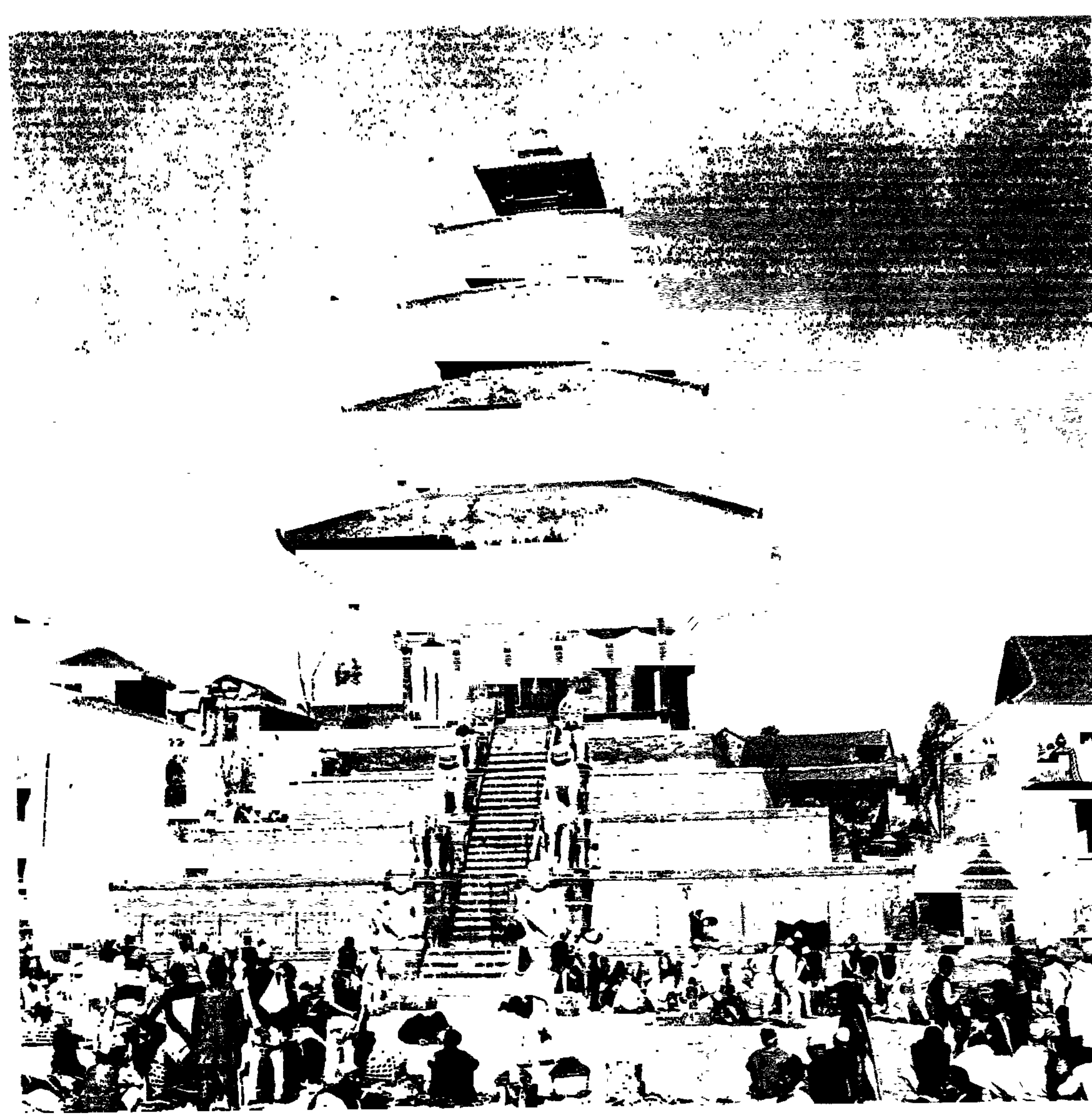


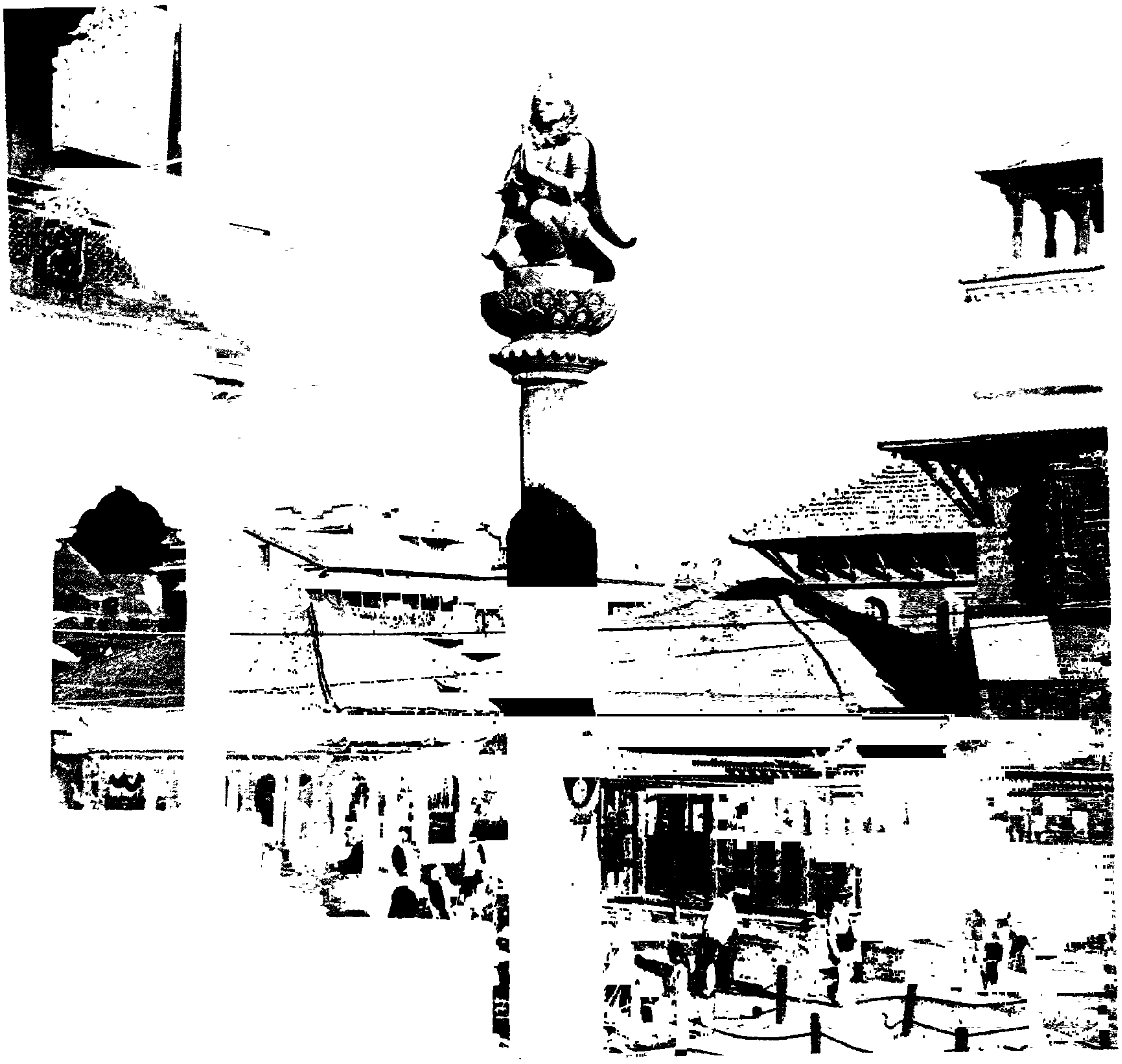


of the gods and sing his praise (*Liṅgapurāṇa*, I, 17). Thus once again, in a bizarre and fantastic cosmogony which even the gods themselves with their boundless insight cannot fathom, the power of creation is expressed in a phallic symbol. Its appearance in a pillar of fire might also point to some connection with the Manichaean myths.

# III

The cult of the *liṅga* was so popular in the religious symbiosis achieved in Nepal that not even the Buddhists were able to reject it. In taking it over, however, they gave it a new slant. The *yoni* became the symbol of the cosmic waters and the turbulent movement of the limitless possibilities of being, while the *liṅga* symbolised the emergence from this turbulence of the lotus, representing the ordered life which reaches its culmination in spiritual serenity. But in all this riot of phallic and





sexual symbols, retaining the name of the organ but often abandoning realism in favour of an inoffensive stylisation, there is little or nothing that can be called obscene; for the whole thing must be seen as part of a complete cosmic and religious pattern.

In one of the oldest and most famous of the Upanishads the various parts of the ritual chants are matched with the different stages of copulation. (In the following text the Sanskrit forms are retained in view of their liturgical significance).



"When he tenders his invitation, it is the syllable *him;* when he makes his request, it is a *prastāva;* when he lies with the woman, it is the *udgītha;* when he lies on the woman, it is the *pratihāra;* when he reaches his objective, it is the *nidhana;* when he comes to the end, it is (also) the *nidhana.* Such is the song *Vāmadevya,* which is wholly concerned with sexual congress.
"He who is familiar with *Vāmadevya,* a song concerned with sexual congress, becomes a man who lies with women. One encounter leads to another: he achieves long life, lives well, becomes rich in posterity and in flocks and herds, and acquires great renown. No woman can be denied to him: such is the rule."

(*Chandogya-Up.*, II, 5, 15.)

Another text, equally sacred and famous, adds:

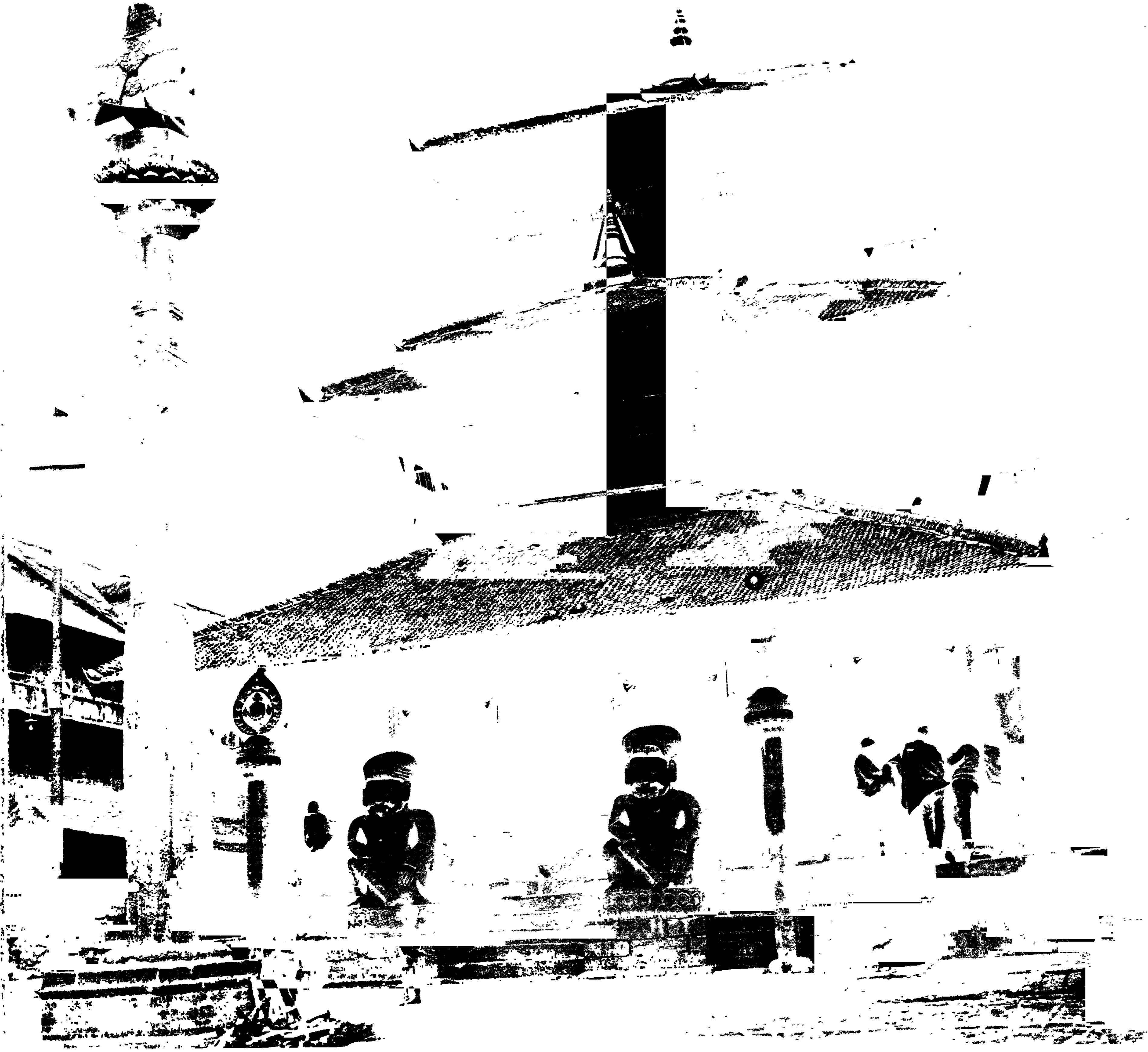
"Woman is fire: the sexual organ is the fuel, the hair around it is the smoke, the vagina is the flame, the act of penetration is the coal, the feelings of pleasure are the sparks. In this fire the gods offer up semen, and from this offering man is born."

(*Brhadāranyaka-Up.*, VII, 2, 15).

Here the sacrificial act is the sacrifice to Agni: the fire corresponds to the sexual act. This parallelism between sex and religion must be constantly borne in mind since, as we shall see, it informs the whole religious experience of India. Another of the Upanishads—those texts which are fundamental to Indian speculative thought—asserts unequivocally that "the act of love serves not only the purposes of procreation but also pleasure and delight" (*Kauṣitakī-Up.*, III, 8).

In later times the worship of woman as the earthly incarnation of the Goddess or of Power is prescribed by many schools, both Buddhist (e. g., in *Guhyasamāja*, p. 97) and Hindu. In the Śākta sects particular importance was attached to the cult of the girl of sixteen *(kumarīpūjā);* for sixteen is the perfect number, the whole, and it is also the immortal part which permits the infinite succession and
















renewal of the others, like the invisible sixteenth part of the moon which ensures the eternal revolution of the lunar days.

The girl of sixteen, the *kumārī*, is worshipped as a divine incarnation in certain festivals in Nepal *(Indrayātrā)*. Innumerable examples of the exaltation of the *kumārī* and of woman in general are to be found in Tantric literature:

> "Woman is the creator of the universe, the universe is her form; woman is the foundation of the world, she is the true form of the body. Whatever form she takes, whether the form of a man or a woman, is the supreme form; in woman is the form of all things, of all that lives and moves in the world. There is no jewel rarer than woman, no condition superior to that of a woman. There is not, nor has been, nor will be any destiny to equal that of a woman; there is no kingdom, no ascesis, to be compared with a woman; there is not, nor has been, nor will be any holy place like unto a woman; there is no prayer to equal a woman; there is not, nor has been, nor will be any mystical exercise to compare with a woman, no formula nor ascesis to match a woman; there are not, nor have been, nor will be any riches more valuable than a woman. The initiate must seek, following the rules, to obtain a girl of sixteen whom he loves, who is fair and fresh and seductive, who has the exalted spirits of youth, who has lively eyes, who is intoxicated with passion and always moved by desire, who is attentive only (to true love)."
> (*Śaktisaṅgama-Tantra*, II, p. 52, vv. 42 ff.).

This was the opening passage of a ceremony in the course of which the girl of sixteen in the fullness of her sensuality and beauty was worshipped, so that all things might be purified by her presence; the initiate was required to meditate on the woman, himself remaining unmoved but arousing "agitation" in her.

During the ceremony he might put on the girl's ornaments and thus assume the aspect of a woman, while the girl took on the aspect of a man, thus confirming the principle that the two poles are equal, interchangeable and mutually complementary. These are the fundamental premisses behind the rites practised by the adherents of certain *śākta* schools, the *kaula*, who worshipped the inexhaustible power of the Divinity visibly incarnate in woman.

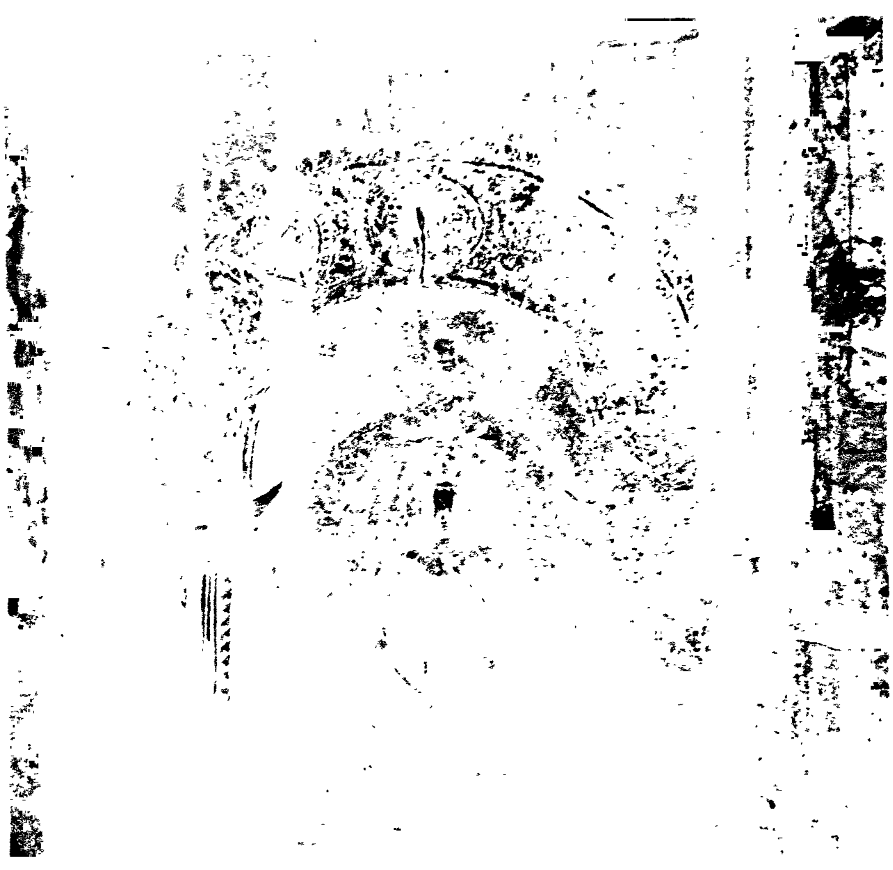
Without for the moment examining possible esoteric interpretations, we may note that the initiatory rites of Diamond Buddhism require the disciple, before being sanctified by baptism, to present to the master a girl in the bloom of youth (technically known as *mudrā*), bright-eyed and adorned with

garlands and necklaces. The master accepts the offering and has intercourse with her in a ceremony which is known as the "assembly" (*Prajñopāyaviniścayasiddhi*, III, pp. 6 ff.).

These are of course ambiguous expressions which were no doubt meant to be interpreted in a figurative and esoteric sense; but on occasion, as with certain sects belonging to the "left-hand path" (*Vāmamārga*), they might be taken literally, with consequences which can readily be foreseen. It



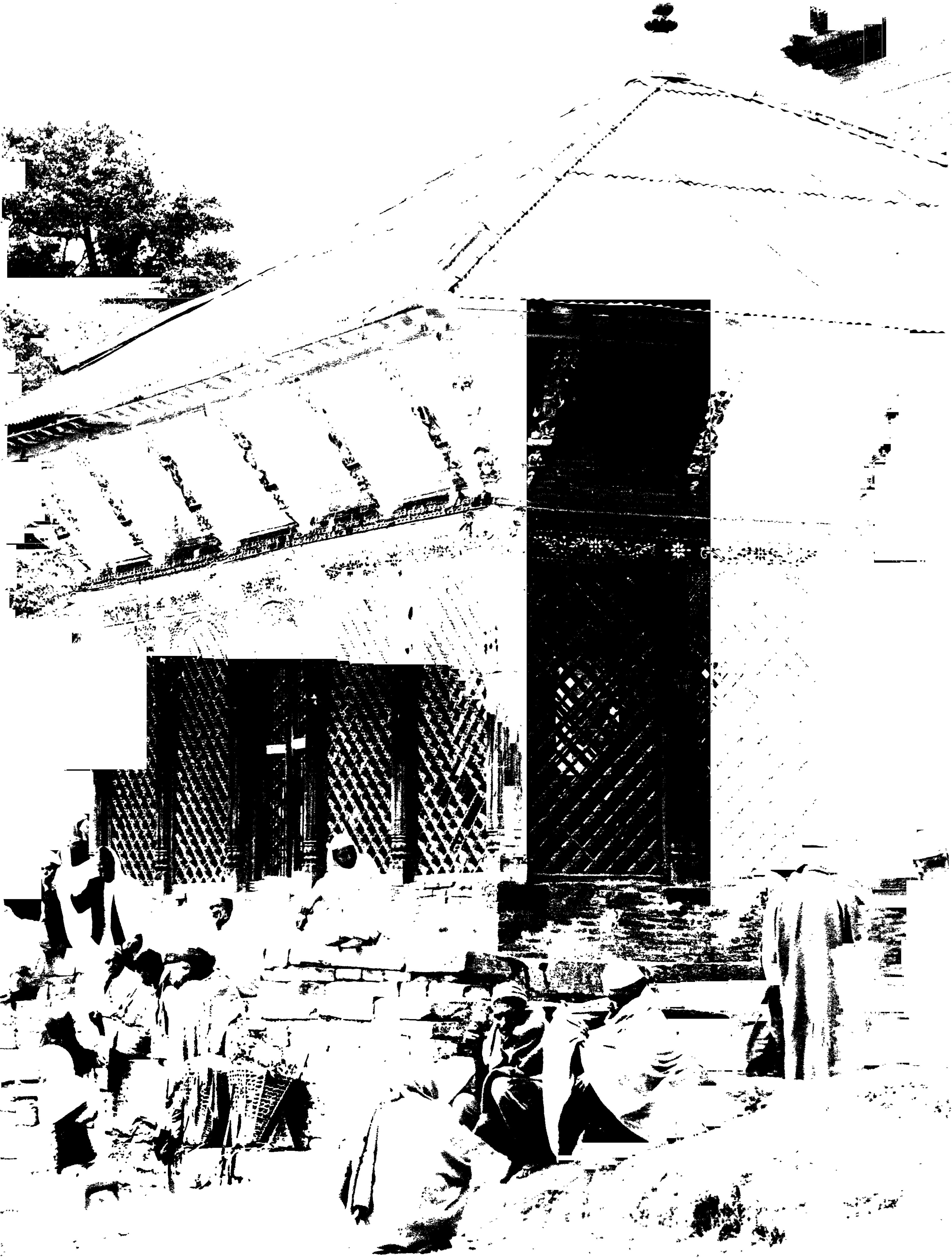
is to be noted, however, that this statement of the theories of the school is put in the mouth of Śiva himself in reply to a request from the Goddess; then, concerned about possible misunderstandings of his teaching, he hastens to reiterate, as if to divest himself of responsibility for any false interpretations which the non-initiate might put on his words: "But all this must be kept secret—it must be kept secret—it must be kept secret at all costs".



## IV

It is thus clear that the cosmology, mythography and soteriology of India are dominated by the presence of sex. The processes of speculative thought are directed towards the erection of fine-spun philosophical and mystical structures which transform the erotic and sexual element into a symbol of the stages of the divine epiphany or into an object of meditation, sublimating and purifying it to such an extent that it is not always easy to separate out the two interpretations and distinguish the real from the allegorical sense. And finally in Tantric thought, which is strongly marked by elements of rustic and popular tradition, sexual symbolism occupies a still more prominent place, and is then subjected to the same process of sublimation and "transference" — not always with complete success.

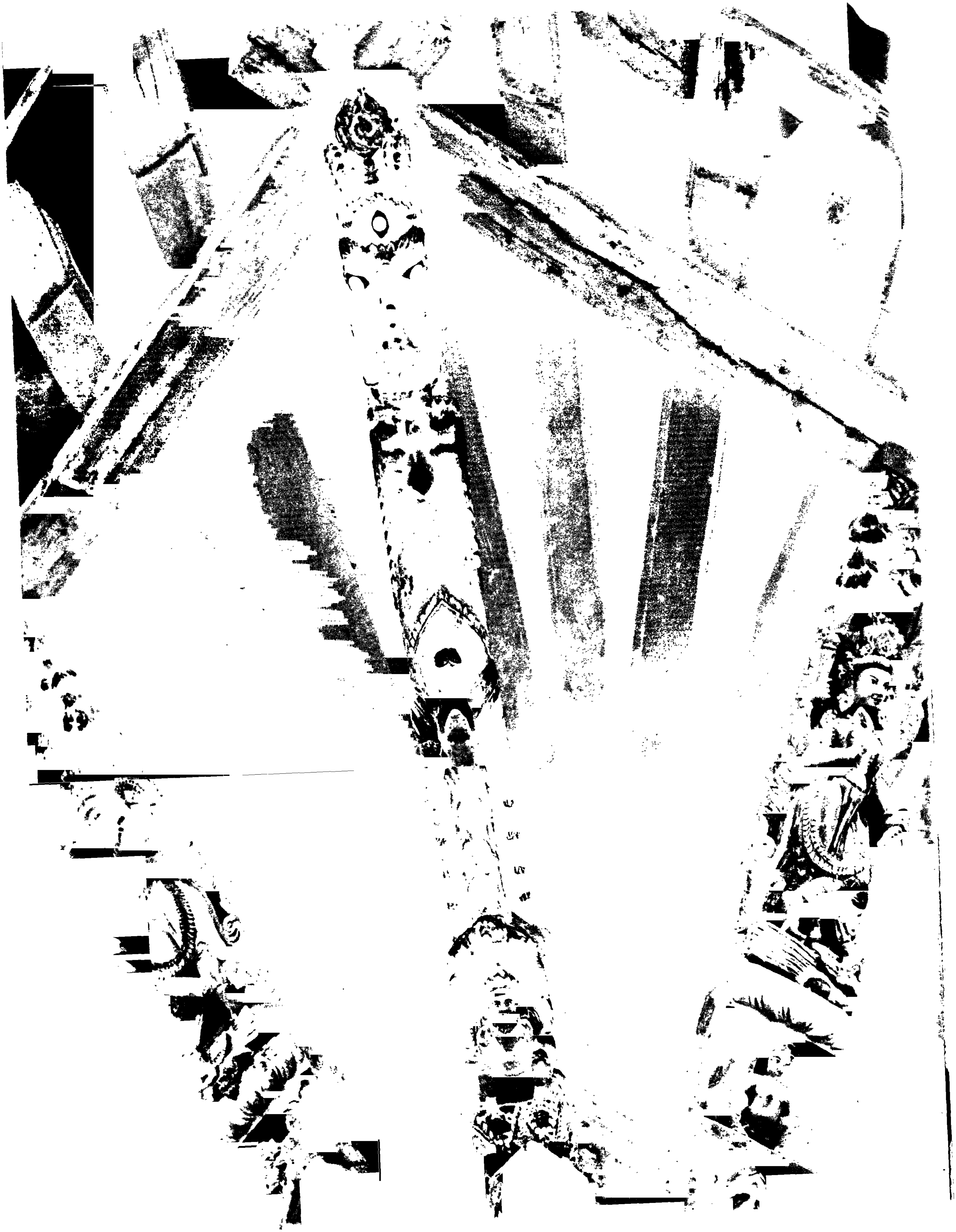
The Tantras reflect gnostic trends in Indian thought, and indeed have a number of analogies with Western gnosticism. Many of them set out to achieve a transfiguration of man so that he can find within himself a secret identity with the supreme principle of being and thus attain union with it. The means through which this can be achieved is an elaborate liturgy, sometimes dramatic in form, which draws man out of darkness towards the light, from error to illumination, from impurity to essential purity, from the emptiness of non-being to the fullness of Being. Through their contact with the everyday life of the mass of the people and their reflection of popular cults and beliefs, widely held though primitive as they frequently were, the Tantras took over and made their own the erotic element which lay at the root of the religious perceptions of the masses. The Tantras are divided into classes; and those in the higher classes are based on the assumption that passion is instinctive in man, and that since it is innate—a part of man's very being—it cannot be suppressed. The aim must thus







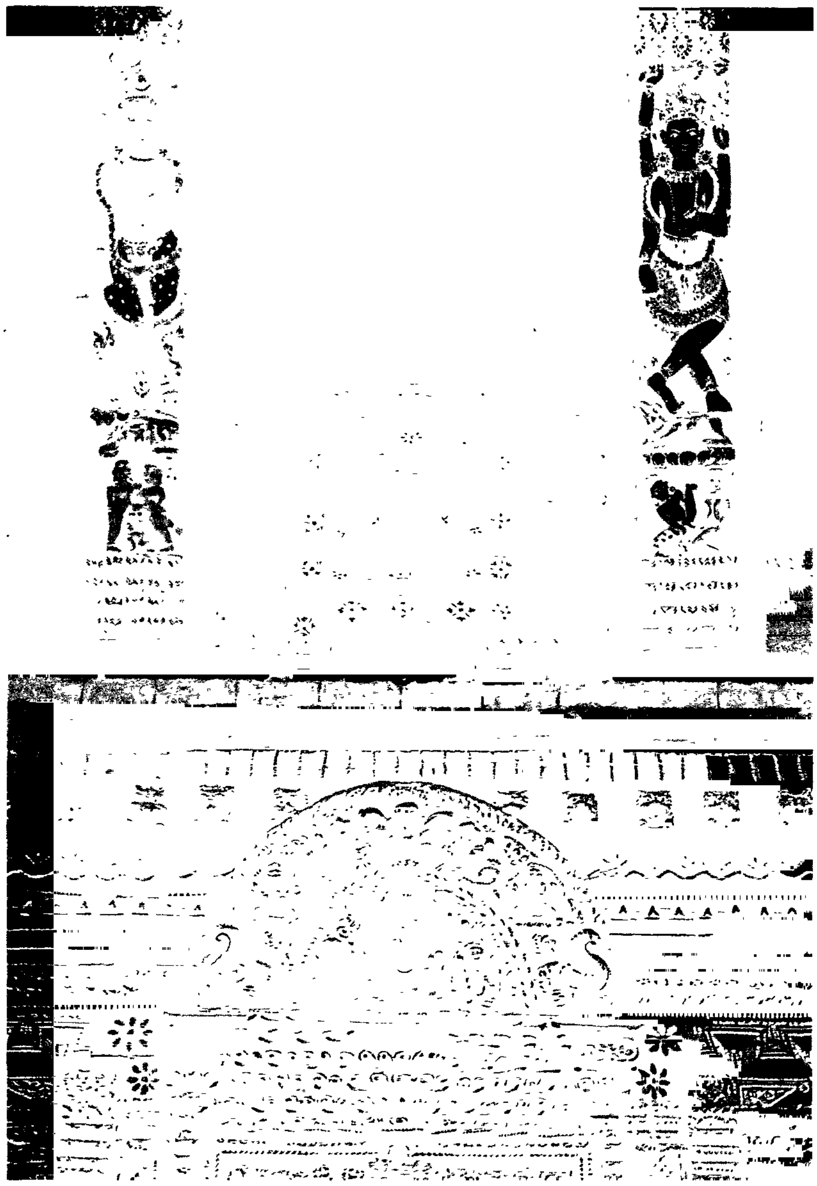


be to achieve its "transference", to divert it into suitable channels, to transfigure it. The same symbols, of course, continually recur. The images of many Tantric divinities, like those known to the Tibetans as *yab-yum*, "father-mother", and their Buddhist counterparts, the couple whom the Śaivite schools define as *śaktiman*, "possessor of *śakti*", or as *śakti*, "power", represent the coupling of man and woman, whatever differences there may be in the iconographic formulae and whatever divergences there may be in the theories behind them.

The Buddhist Tantras in which this erotic symbolism is most apparent are divided into four groups (in certain Tibetan schools six). The latest, and most esoteric, prescribe ceremonies in the course of which there are references to sexual union with a female consort. This might or might not take place; but there were undoubtedly certain schools or sects in which the presence of the consort and sexual union with her were considered necessary. Intercourse took place in the centre of the *maṇḍala*—a psychocosmogram drawn on the ground especially for such ceremonies—but according to the rules of certain sects of the *Sahajīyā* there must be no emission of semen, for semen is identified with the thought of illumination: *bodhi cittaṃ na utserjet*, "Do not let the thought of illumination fall to the ground", says the *Guhyasamājatantra*. As in the Manichaean schools which asserted the equivalence of semen and light, ejaculation was thought to involve a fresh imprisonment of the light of consciousness in the deceiving world of duality—in the existential, space-time, *saṃsāra*—whereas it must be the object to transcend this.

According to certain Tantras the adept moves in a world of symbols which he must interpret and to which he has access after special rites of consecration of increasing sublimity. Here again the terms are ambiguous, and their meanings can differ widely according to the circumstances. Theoretically, for example, the initiate must begin by imagining the "coupling of the master with the consort": that is, he must contemplate the process of conversion towards which he is aspiring and which is already complete in the master. At a later and higher stage of his initiation the neophyte imagines his own union with the master's consort. Clearly all this is allegorical, for in Indian tradition there can be no redemption for the man who has lain with the wife of his master. What is meant is that by meditating along these lines at this stage of his catharsis the future initiate becomes one with the "thousand-petalled lotus" on his master's head, the light of which reflects the essential consciousness. In the final stage the dichotomy between illusion and reality comes to an end, and the neophyte,



having passed through the earlier baptisms, combines in himself the two aspects, "performance" and "pure knowledge", in a synthesis in which the consort and the master are integrated with him self: in other words he finds himself absorbed into the luminous consciousness *ab initio.*

Such are the philosophical ideas which give meaning to the couplings depicted in Tantric, and especially Buddhist, iconography: appearances are one thing, the significance which the initiate attaches to these appearances is something quite different. The crudity of the representations is purified or eliminated by the flame of mystical ardour with which the neophyte is consumed: to him

these figures are signs which enable him to read the implications of the catharsis he desires to achieve.

It is nevertheless clear that the existence of sex and its unquellable demands is recognised as an undeniable fact: sex is not only an exigency of life but, as such, it has its place in religion as well. Religion cannot, therefore, merely suppress or ignore it, but must accept it as a fact of life and seek to divert it towards other ends than those of its mere natural satisfaction: it must be transformed from an instinct into an elevation.

In the Śaivite schools it may happen that, at least in representational art or in literary allusions, the convergence and intermingling of the sexual impulse and religion is expressed in such crude form that it becomes difficult to suggest symbolic interpretations: the divine copulation is represented as a purely carnal contact. "The *śakti* consists in the pleasure of the *yoni;* the supreme Śiva is the *liṅga;* the dexterity of their union produces the pleasure of the world."

Here the universe is merely the eternally enduring pleasure of the divine couple: a primitive cosmogonic myth which poetically attributed the birth of all created things to the marriage of a Father god and a Mother goddess was taken

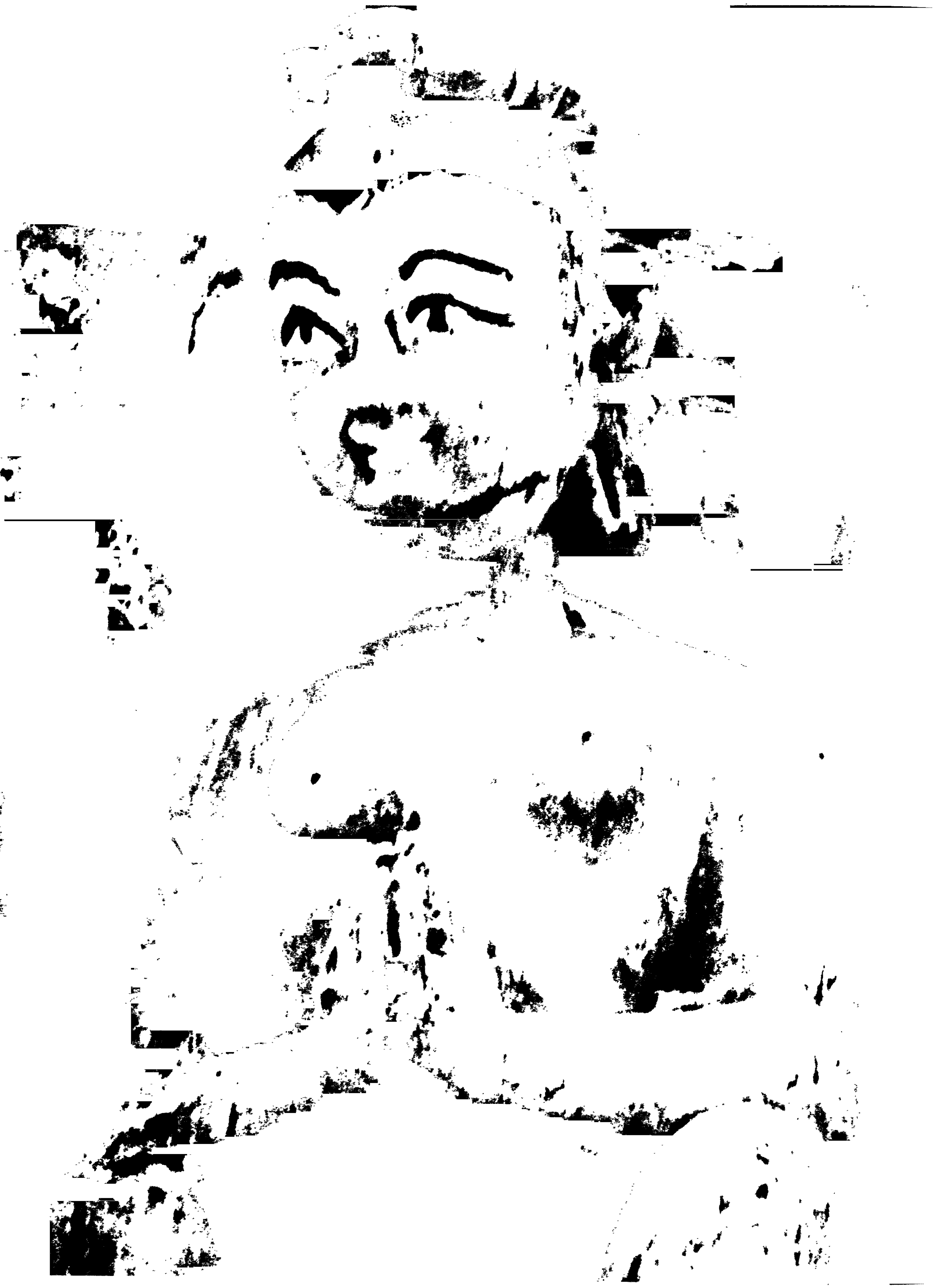


up into the structure of speculative thought and became the foundation of the whole edifice, without losing the realism of its original form.

We are able to participate in and enjoy the divine pleasure because we are its creatures who can but contemplate and adore.



































# V

The universe is thus an eternally enduring sport of god. The word applied to this sport is *līlā*, which is applicable to any form of diversion, but particularly to amorous diversion or dallianceo. It is the form in which *kāma*—an unchanging will *(sanātana-saṃkalpa)* which imagines, moves and gives rise to all things—realises and manifests itself. We cannot, however, exclude the possibility that certain expressions used in this literature, such as those already quoted, had another object as well—a firm intention to exclude ordinary mortals from secrets reserved for the initiate alone. In this respect the Tantras are merely continuing a tradition which is already found in the Upanishads: "The gods love those things that are veiled and abhor those that are clear" *(Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Up.*, IV, 2).

Let us suppose, for example, that a reader not versed in Tantric or gnostic doctrine comes on a passage such as this (from the *Prajñoprāyaviniścayasiddhi*): "The initiate who makes love with his own mother, his own sister, his own daughter or any other female relative may attain his object provided that ın making love he conforms fully to the rules of *yoga*." The reader must inevitably cast the book from him in horror and condemn it as an abominable heresy. The key to the matter, however, lies in the phrase "conform fully to the rules of *yoga*" and in the deliberate choice of words which have a quite different sense from the literal one, since they refer to the recondite techniques of yoga. Thus there was a great gulf between the initiate and the non-initiate, and in using such turns of phrase the initiate were deliberately erecting a barrier against the others. The feature common to all the esoteric schools was that they required a long novitiate, a process of patient experiment,

a period of arduous and diligent study under the direction of masters, a closed community of people all seeking the same goal, and a ritual of baptisms and liturgies which bound the participants and the elect into a secret society firmly determined not to reveal its private paths.

As an example of this we may take certain Buddhist Tantras which recommend a diet of human flesh, excrement and urine, menstrual blood and semen; advise the adept to kill all creatures and to love all women without restraint; denounce as inferior beings those who follow the precepts of morality (*Guhyasamāja*, pp. 128 ff.); and assert that evil will befall those who worship the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

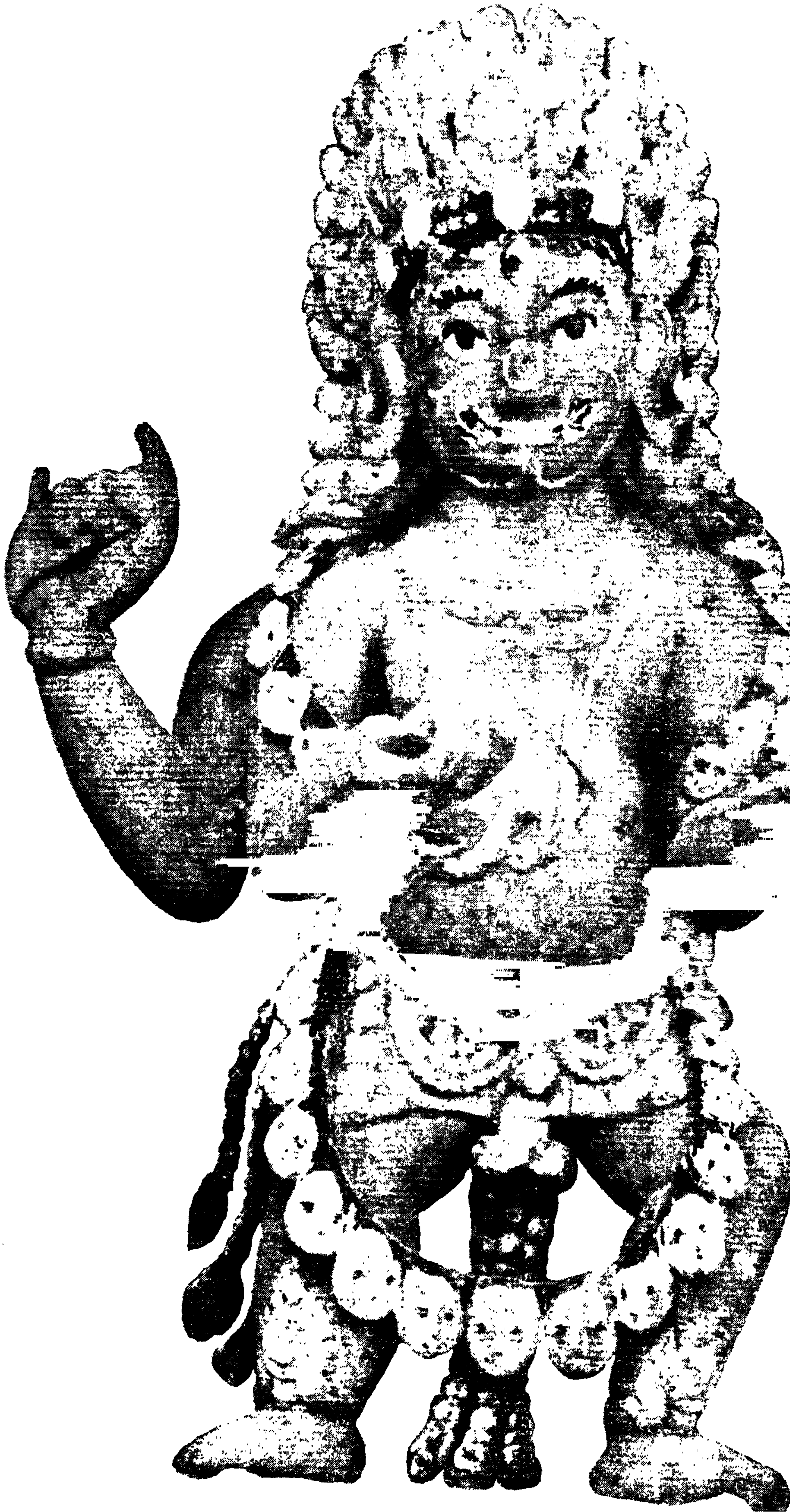
Similarly there are Hindu Tantric texts containing revelations granted by Śiva or Śakti in a dialogue of questions and answers beginning with the sentence "I shall reveal unto thee a supreme secret, which must be kept hidden like the *yoni* of thine own mother." Some Buddhist Tantras begin by describing how Buddha, at the start of the epiphanies in which he vouchsafed his revelations, was in the *yoni* of the "Mother" of all Buddhas. Others again prescribe the observance of the five "*ma-kara*", the five "letters in *ma*", with the ideas they imply—flesh *(māṃsā)*, fish *(matsya)*, the seed of a plant known for its aphrodisiac virtues (*mudrā:* the word also means the consort of a god or initiate and a particular position of the hands), coitus *(maithuna)* and alcohol *(madya)*—all of them censured by Brahmanic moral and social law.

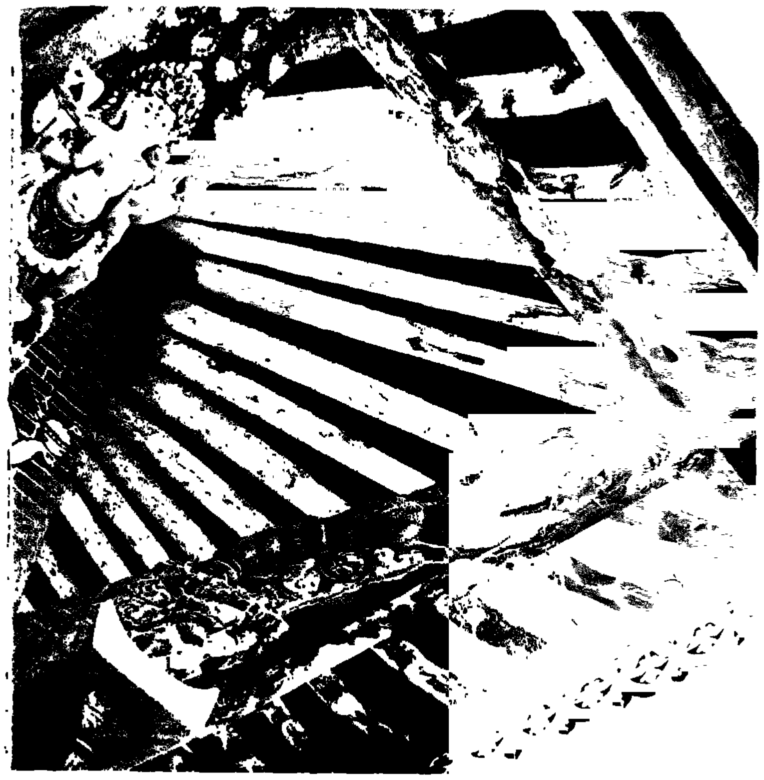
But these injunctions—which, taken literally, sound like blasphemies—were understood by the initiate in a sense very different from their direct meaning. We may begin by considering alcohol *(madya)*, which was permitted only to the lower classes and the untouchables. In reality alcohol means the ambrosia which resides in the upper part of the head: that is, the enjoyment of the bliss which results from having achieved the upward flow of semen *(urdhvaretas)* in accordance with the rules of yoga.

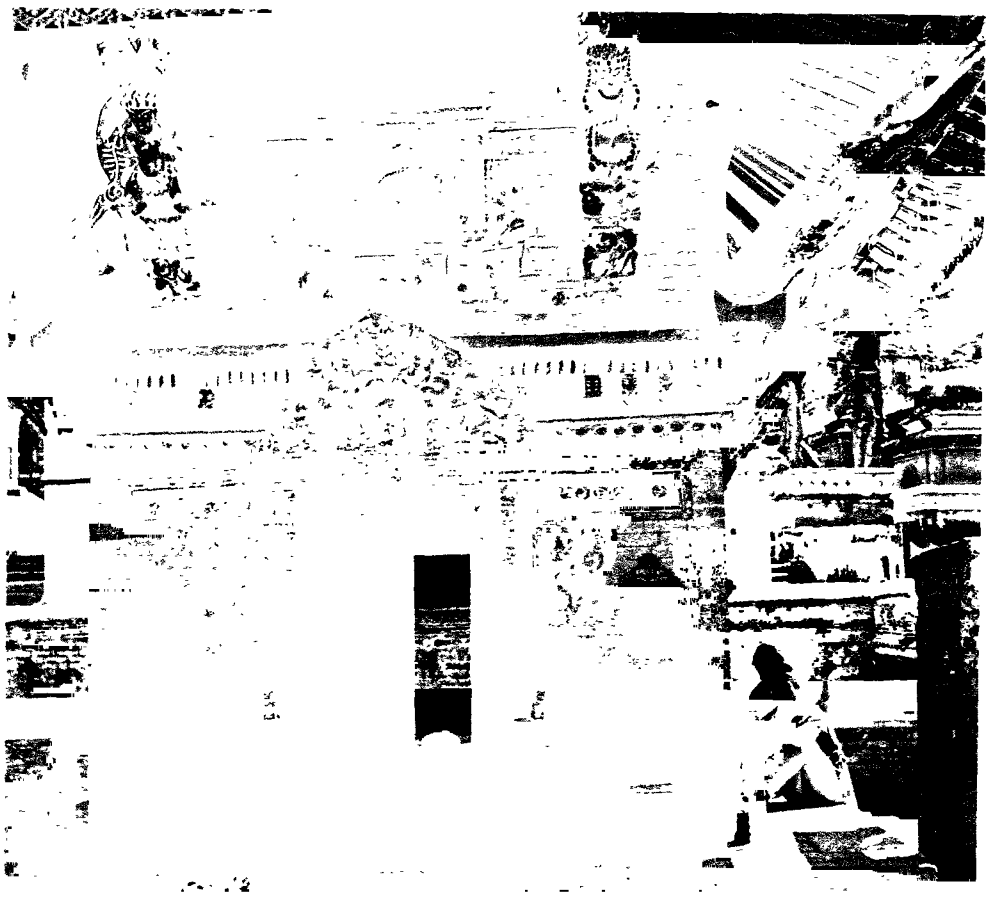
The word for flesh *(māṃsā)* is applied not to flesh itself but to the formulas *(mantra)* on which it is necessary to meditate, knowing that the sounds of which the word is composed are woven into the mysterious web of the universe.

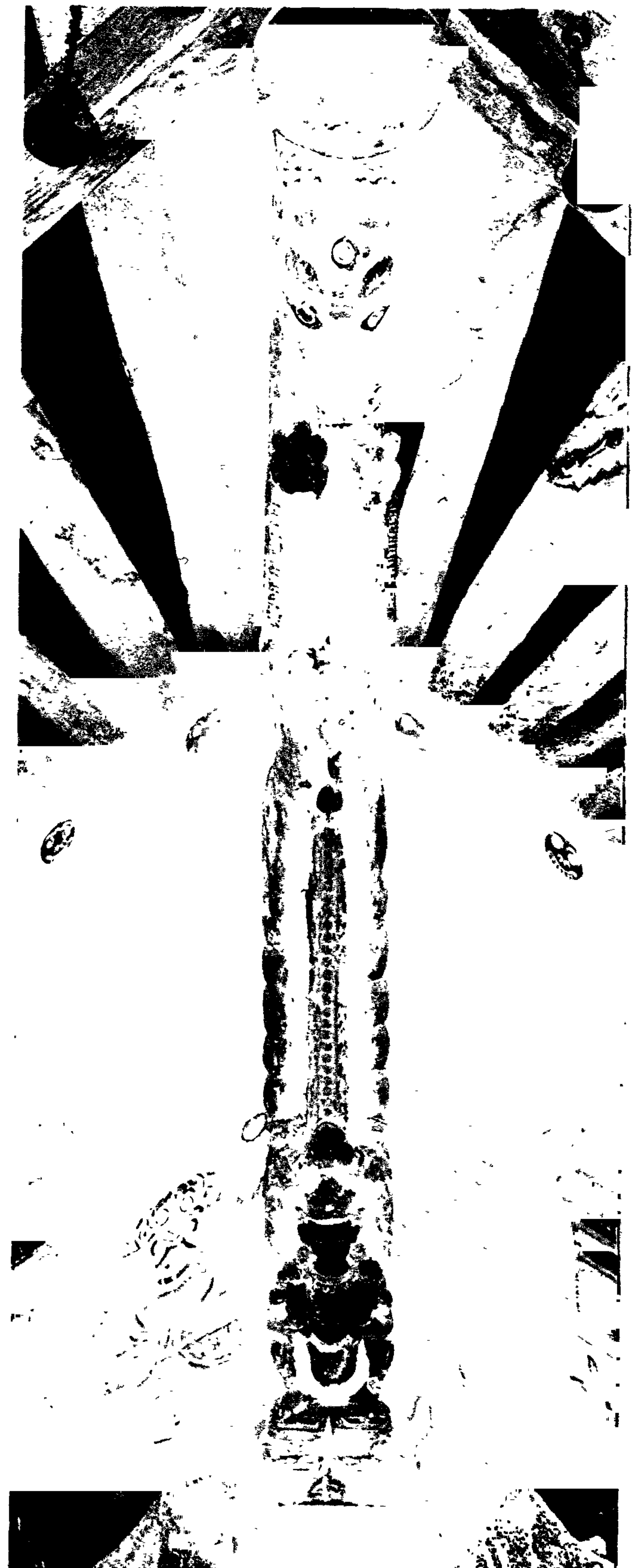
Fish *(matsya)* similarly does not mean fish, but rather the senses, which must be kept under control, reduced to their inert and inactive potentialities, and rendered deaf to any appeal or invitation from the external world. Many ascetics were called Matsyendra or

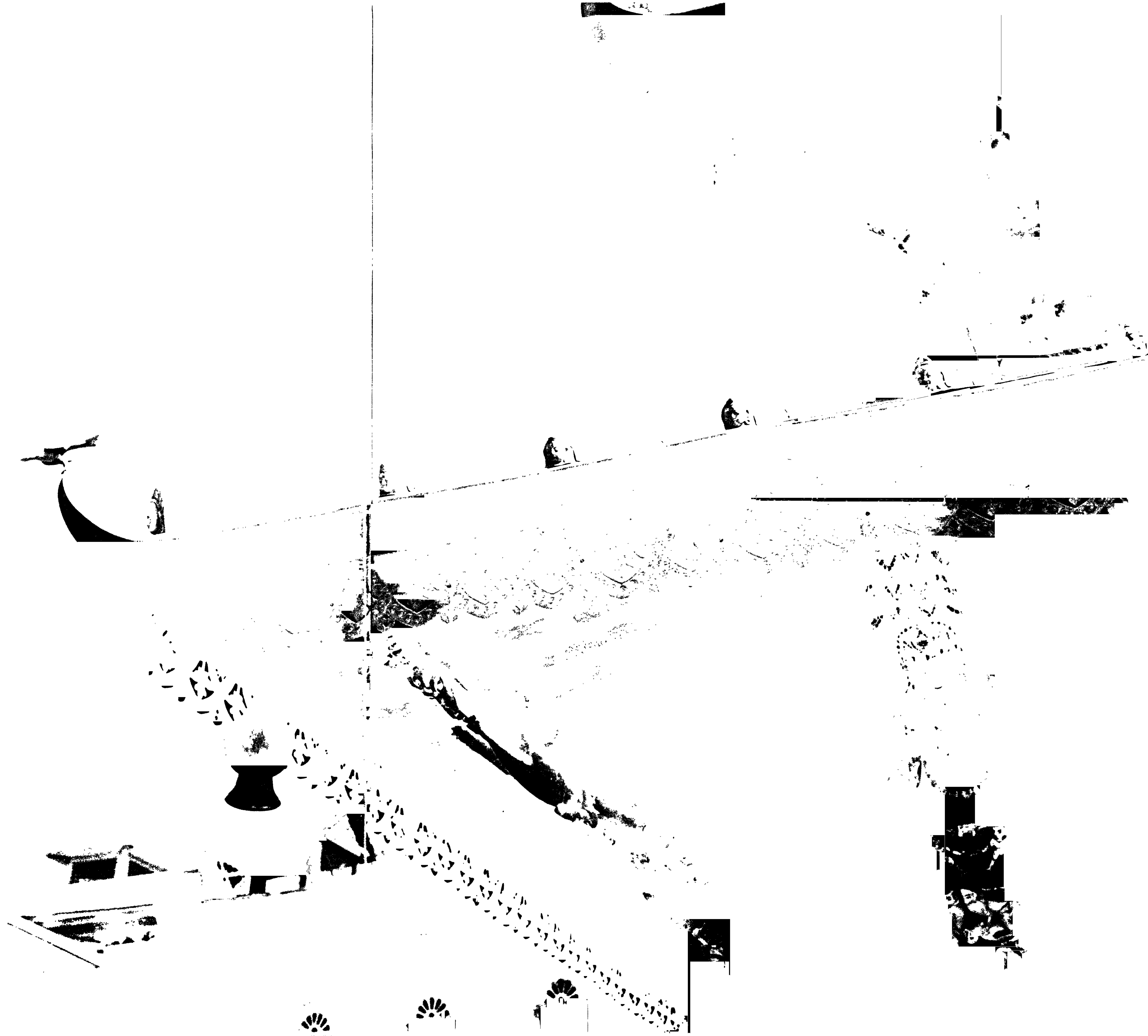
















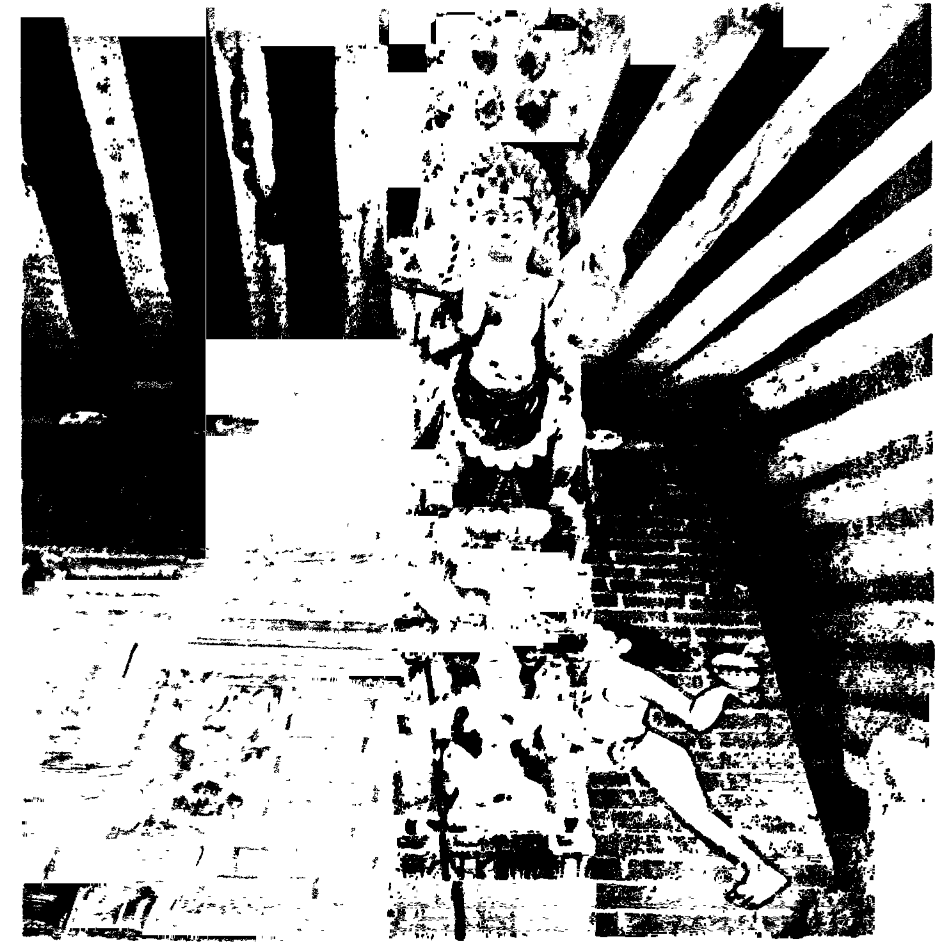
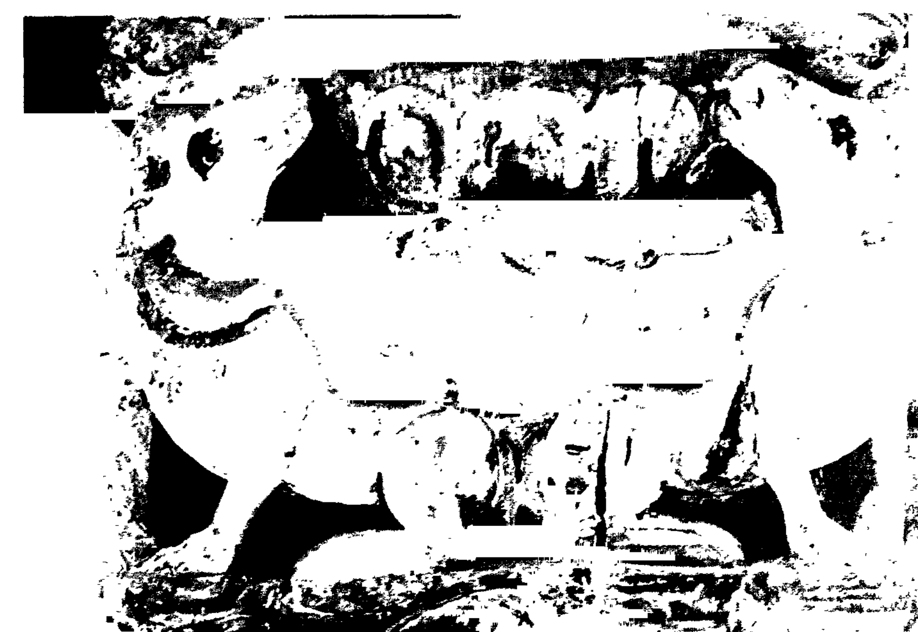













Mīnanāth, "lord of the fish"—equivalent to "master of the senses", and indicating that they had finally achieved control over their senses.

*Mudrā* does not mean a consort, nor an aphrodisiac, but rather the splendid and refulgent lotus which in the practice of yoga glows like a dazzling flame on top of the head.

Finally coitus *(maithuna)* does not mean marriage or carnal union, but the consummation of yoga, the attainment of supreme wisdom.

We thus see the two interpretations—one literal and the other esoteric—constantly running side by side, so that it is no longer possible to establish an exact demarcation between the two. The result is that in general when Tantric culture becomes dominant, as in Nepal, the sexual act can be considered in a number of different ways—as the simple satisfaction of an instinct, or as the repetition of the primal copulation of the divine couple, the eternal principle of all things, who are invoked by India's greatest poet, Kalidāsa, at the beginning of his famous poem, *Raghuvaṃśa* ("I give honour to Pārvatī and Maheśvara, creators of the world, joined together as the meaning of a word is joined with the understanding of it"), or again as a symbol of the spatio-temporal plane which the act itself enables us to transcend. In the Buddhist schools coitus can also be regarded as the achievement of the thought of illumination, the state of Buddha, through the indissoluble operation of the act (compassion, the father-god) and of pure wisdom (the mother-goddess).

Moreover the freeing of the world of transmigration from space-time is not merely the transcending of this space-time, a reintegration in the primal One or in the essential luminous consciousness, but is also bliss—bliss which is absolute plenitude, the satisfaction of the Being which is beyond all duality, the reconstitution of the primal androgyne. The Indians were always concerned to attain such bliss, since it was the sign of absolute fulfilment, of Being as opposed to becoming: the aim to be achieved, beyond space-time. Of this achievement we can enjoy brief instants in this world, either through mystical experience or by way of aesthetic enjoyment or the release achieved in the sexual act. These various experiences can be regarded as identical to the extent that each of them leads to the suspension of duality, the transcending of the dichotomy by which normal consciousness is fatally led astray, a silent and ineffable oblivion. But though it is legitimate to see similarities between these various situations they do nevertheless differ considerably in intensity and duration; and foremost among them is mystical experience, the essential path towards the goal which is sought.



The special term applied to this ecstasy is *ānanda,* meaning bliss which is perfect in itself, absolute and motionless satisfaction; but the term *sukha,* the essential meaning of which is physical pleasure, is also used. The equivalence between the mystical state and the sexual impulse is thus once again confirmed by the use of the same word indiscriminately for both.

The ambiguity between *eros* and religion is carried so far that the positions adopted in the act of love are called *āsana* ("attitudes") and *bandha* ("connections"), using the terms applied to the postures of Haṭhayoga. Similarly mysticism, although seeking complete mastery over the senses, exalts the body as a necessary instrument of salvation (that is, the transference of sensuality into an arduous series of sublimations). "If there were no body", says the *Hevajratantra,* "how could there be any







pleasure?" (the word "pleasure" being understood both in its literal meaning and in its esoteric significance, implying not merely carnal pleasure but the bliss which can be achieved through the practice of yoga).



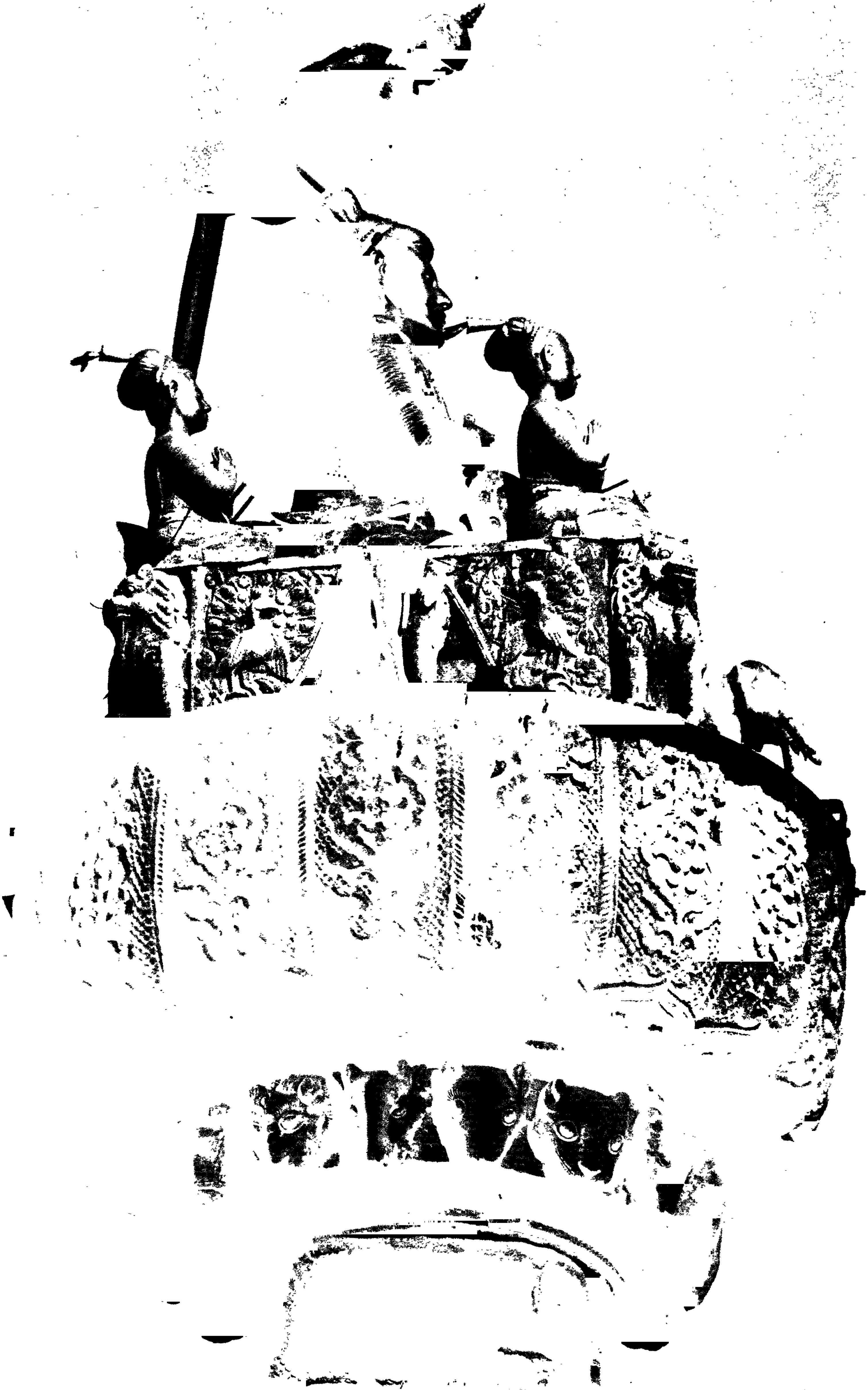


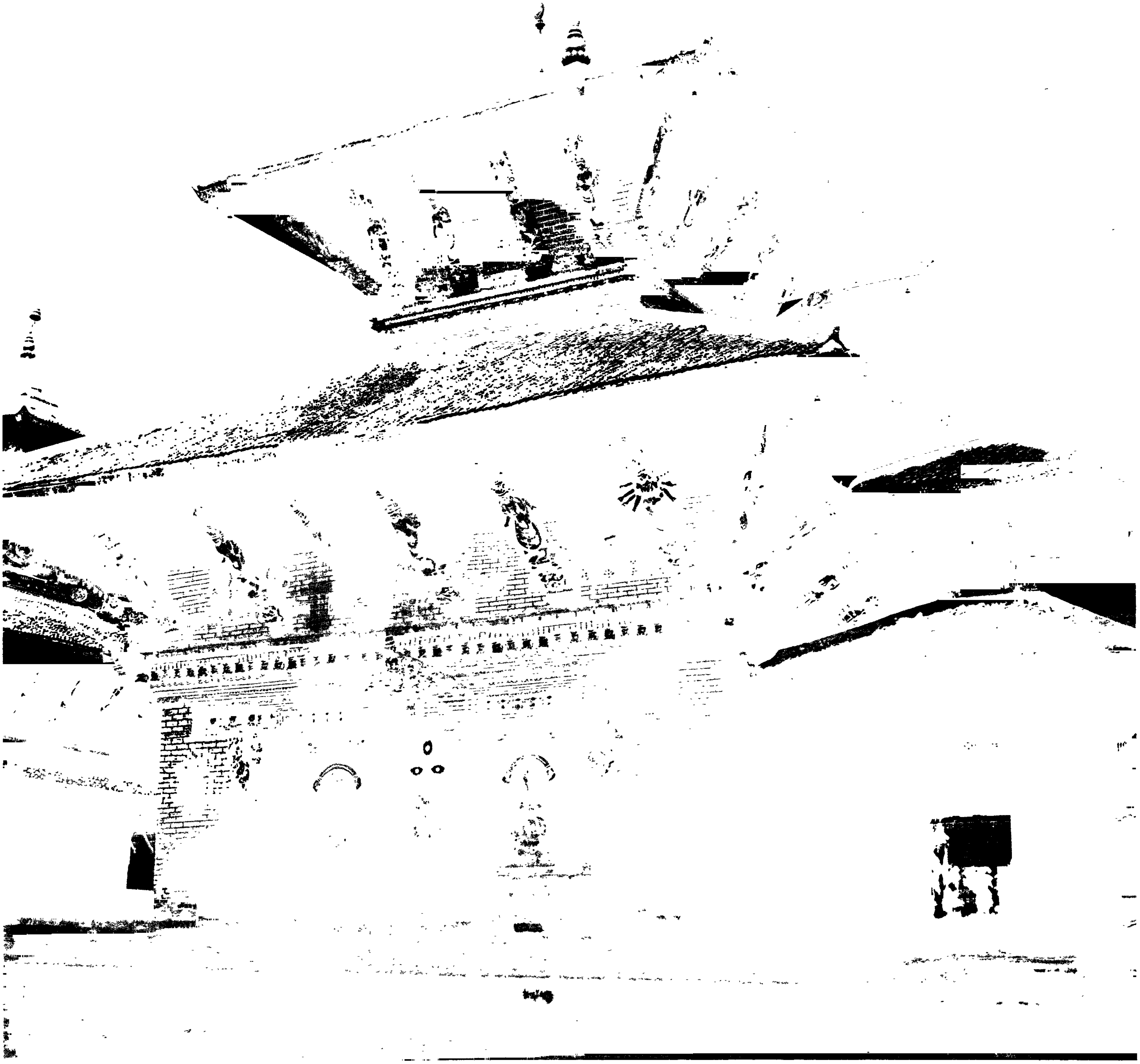
# VI

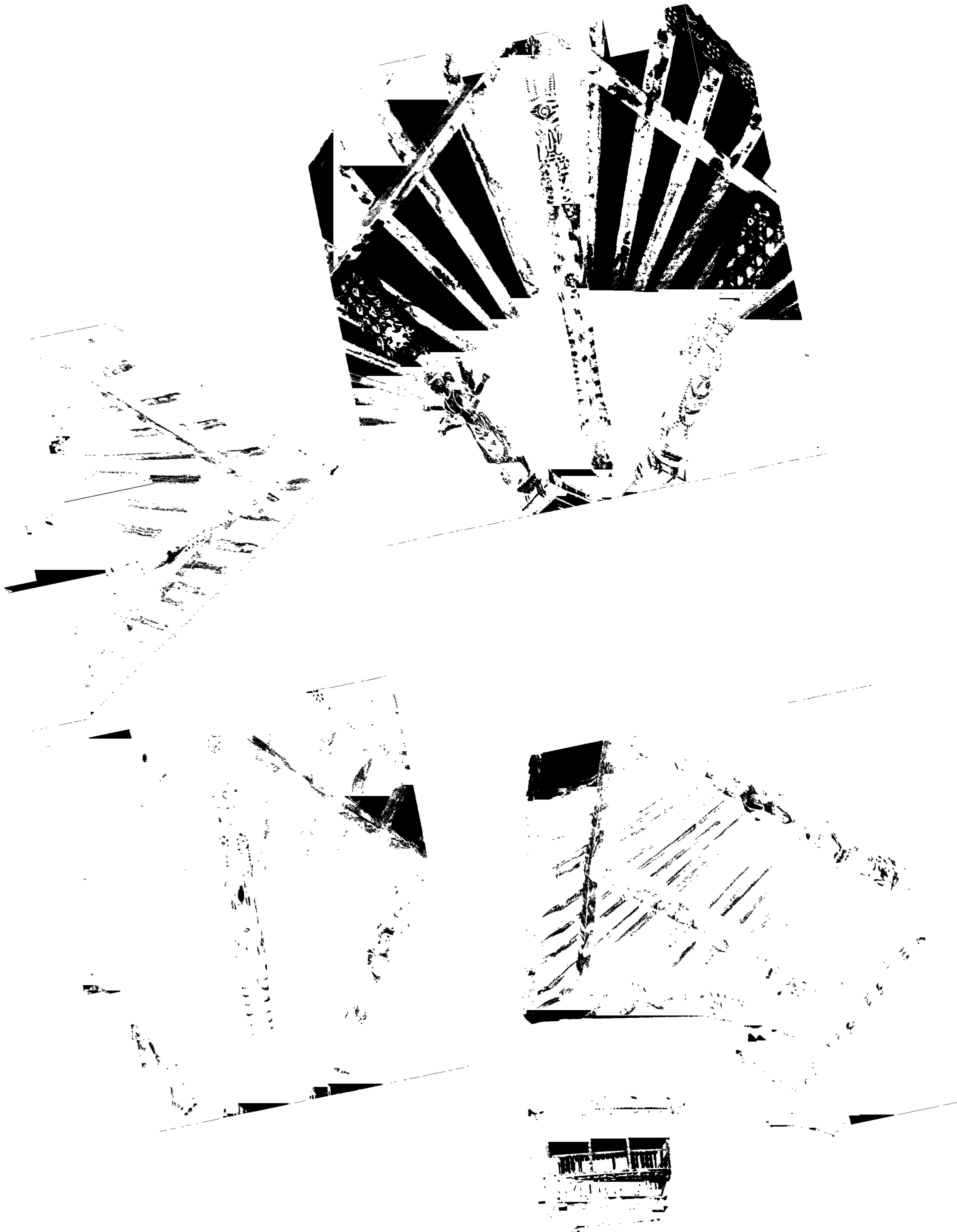
The constant interaction of these two conceptions, one religious and the other erotic, can be observed in literature. This is pervaded and dominated by the presence of sex and of physical beauty, described with a lavishness of detail which is matched in art by the fleshly sensuality of the rustic divinities, the *yakṣinī*, or the *Magna Mater:* an outpouring of sensual stimulation in free and unrestrained exuberance which contrasts with the sombre austerity of the Brahmanic rules or the inhuman renunciations of asceticism. Sex insinuates itself everywhere, and the gods themselves are subject to the same passions as men: they too set out in quest of love, ranging from incest—beginning with the marriage of the primal couple Yama and Yamī—to the adventures of Indra and the passions of certain famous Brahmans. Indra, the great Vedic god, respects no moral laws: he is "he who loves the wives of others", lies with the wife of Gautama and is punished for this fault. Conversely, the technique of ascesis, yoga, admits women freely to its practices; and women are also admitted to orgiastic rites *(gaṇacakra)* and to Tantric rites.

Jayadeva, celebrating the love of Rādhā and Kriṣṇa, the symbol of the individual soul which aspires to reunite itself with God, uses expressions of astonishing sensuality and emotional passion. Frequently his language loses all ambiguity: as Rādhā recalls her encounters with the god, her mystical and spiritual impulses are resolved into an impassioned recollection of carnal contacts. The embraces of Rādhā and Kriṣṇa, lulled by the melody of the verse as it lingers voluptuously on the upsurge of passion, the meeting of the lips, the intertwining of the arms, the loosening of the girdles and the final languor of exhaustion, are so warmly described that no interpretation, however subtle,







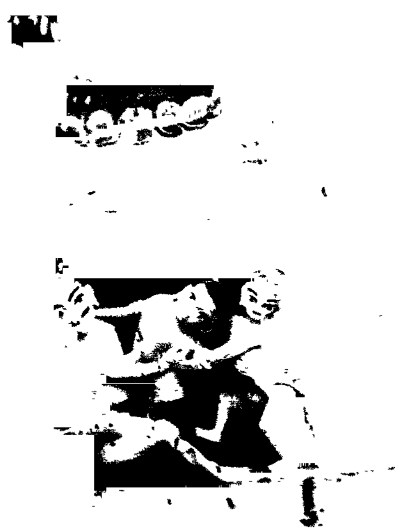


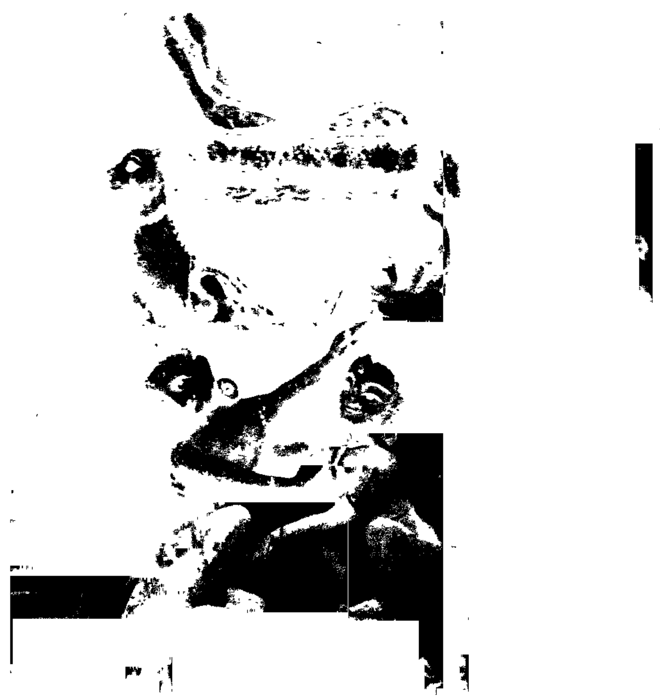
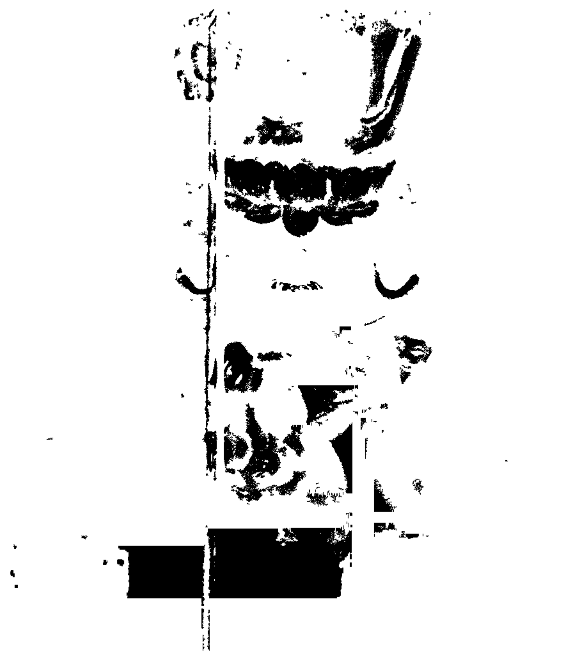












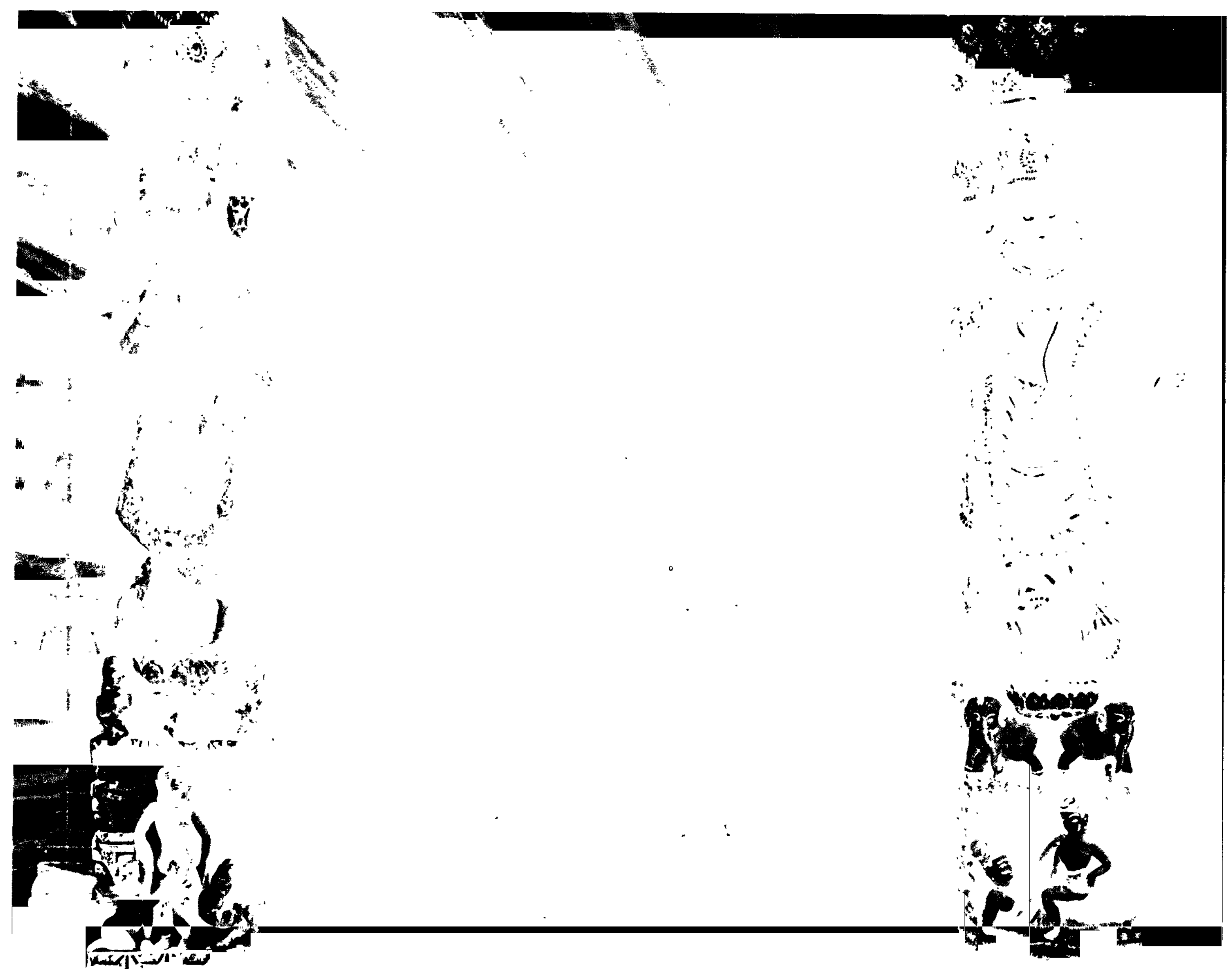








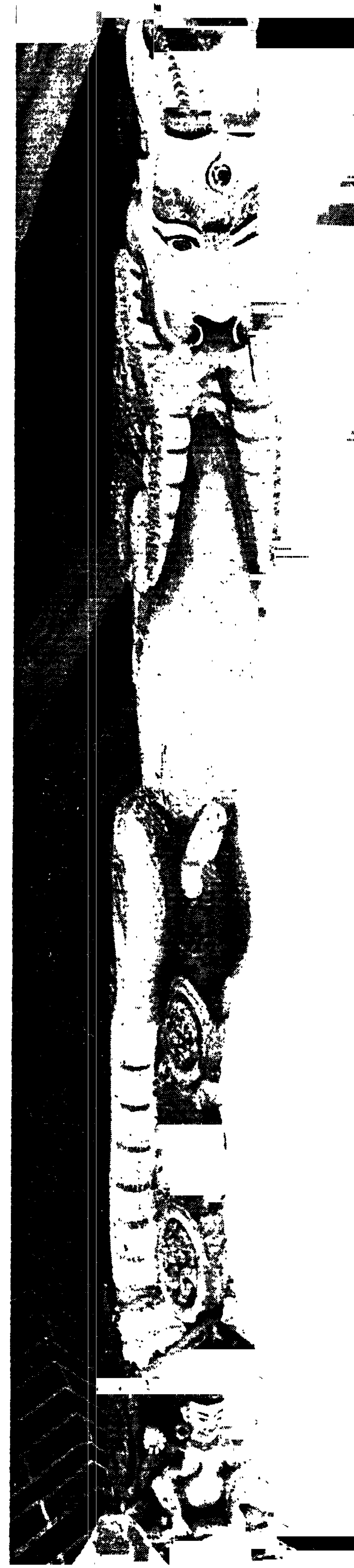





can ever conceal the carnal reality of the scene. This work shows that it is difficult, or indeed impossible, to distinguish the impulses of mystical exaltation or the worshipper's overmastering adoration of the divine couple from the outpouring of sensuality or the poet's detailed treatment of the very human details of the encounter. To transform these states of emotion and passion resulting from sexual excitement into symbols of man's ascent towards celestial heights is an arduous and not always convincing enterprise; for the strength of the devotional impulse is inadequate to conceal the down-to-earth reality of the situation. Accordingly it would require a superhuman effort to achieve the "transference" of this frenzy of the senses and the sublimation of an element which pervades and informs the whole of life.

Pursuing this symbiosis between religion and sex a stage farther, we may note that the adepts of certain mystical sects did not hesitate to seek inspiration in love, its practices and its pleasures, and used erotic terminology in doing so. We may think, for example, of the intense passion of the Bengali poet Caṇḍīdās, a Brahman, for a washerwoman—that is, for a woman with whom a Brahman could not come into contact. But in this case, round which a whole legend grew up in Bengal, the washerwoman was not a woman, but represented the channel which the yogic schools supposed to run along the backbone, the *avadhūtī* (also known as *ḍombī*, the washerwoman). In this channel, after the movement of breath in the two passages which run from the nostrils





to the perineum and represent the dispersion in the spatio-temporal world has been silenced, the liberating fire flares up and the transition from the human to the divine plane is achieved.

In these ideas we seem to hear an echo of the precepts of Indrabhūti, who taught that "the master who seeks to achieve the supreme spiritual realisation must in particular associate with girls born of a family of untouchables, or with a washerwoman or a woman who comes of a shameful lineage" (*Jñānasiddhi*, v. 82). At any rate the language of the poem is inflamed with passion, as if to afford an outlet to the ardour of the senses. In this it is following a tradition also found in the late Buddhist school of the Diamond Vehicle *(Dohākośa)*; but in fact it uses a terminology and attitudes suggested by the profane *eros* to depict the mystical metamorphosis achieved by yoga through its most subtle and difficult practices.

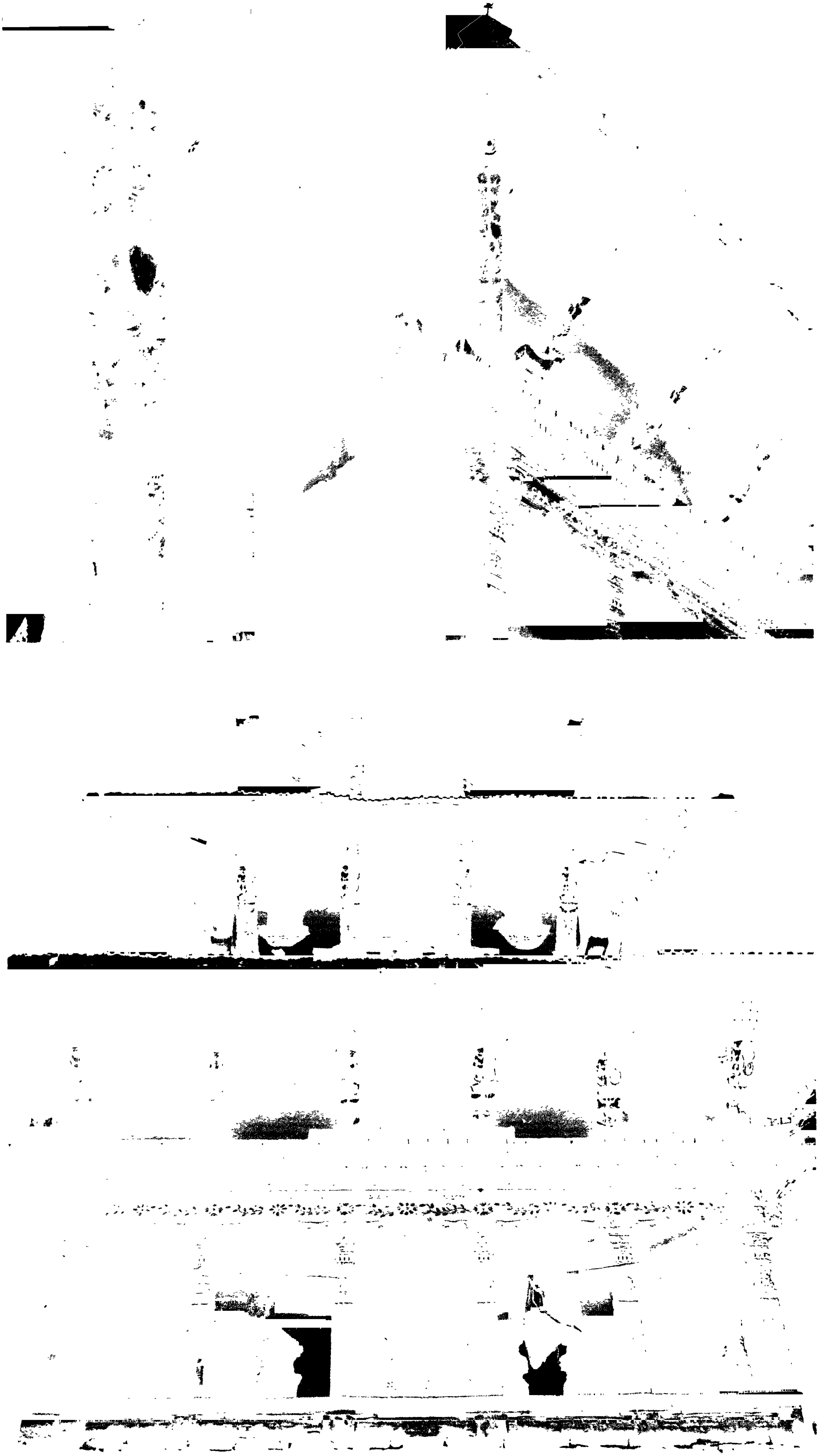
But this is not all. Some sects in Bengal which derived from Caitanya and had well-established connections with the schools of Sahajiyā, of Buddhist and Tantric origin, also laid stress on love



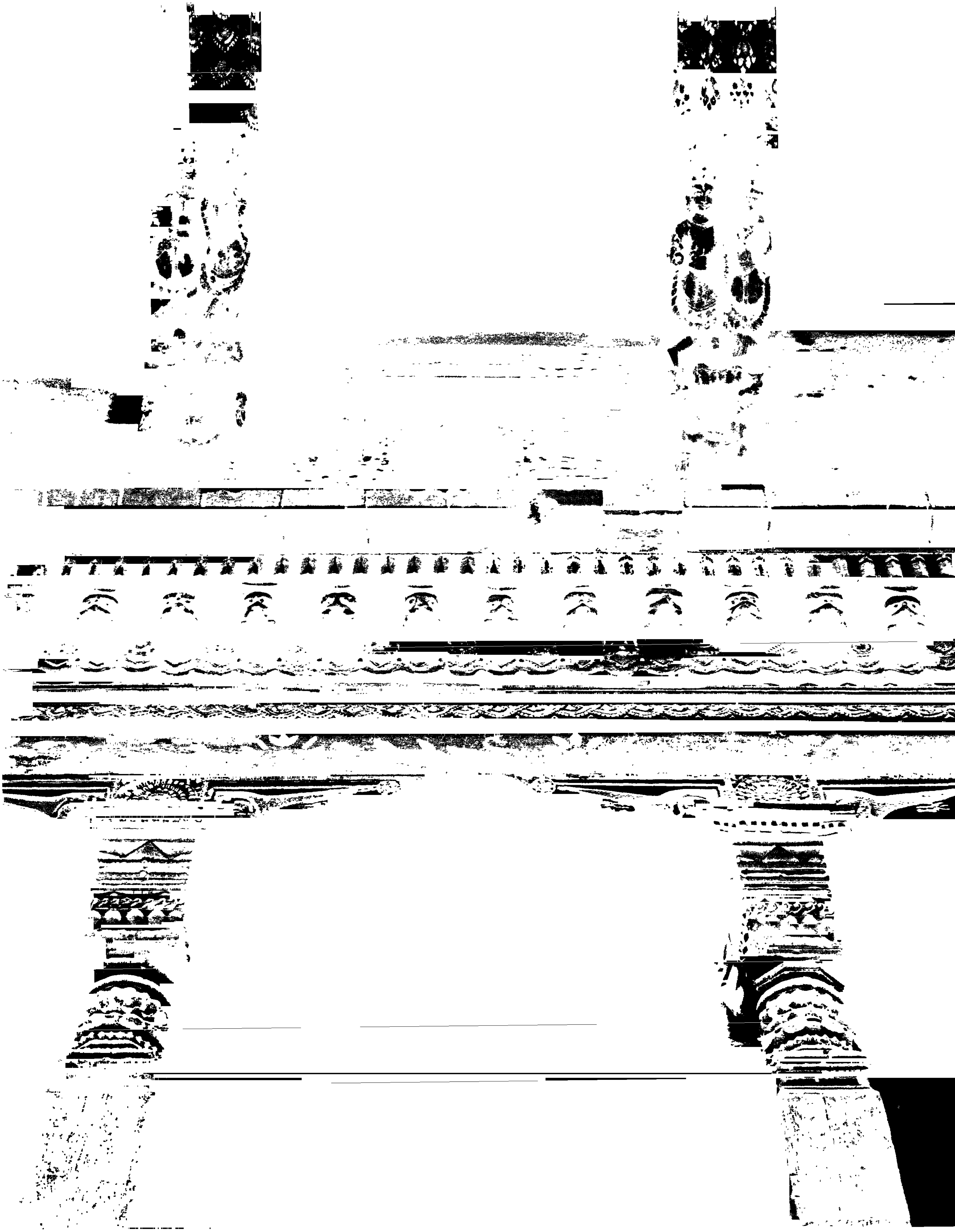
as a means of spiritual edification. They classified and described the various emotional states, exalting not conjugal love with a legally wedded wife *(svakīya)* but the practice of love with another woman *(parakīya)*, an unmarried woman or a woman not yet of marriageable age *(kumārī)*, on the ground that this requires the lovers to depart from the accepted usages and to endure the censure of the world. In such cases the woman might take the initiative *(abhisārikā)*. According to the masters of this school, love of this kind contains no sensual passion: it is not *kāma* but *prema*, a spiritual love which subdues the soul. It is evident, however, that the mystical state which the adept seeks to achieve is heavily interwoven with erotic emotions: *eros*, whether it is called *kāma* or *prema*, remains the supreme motive force of this ascent. The woman and the passion of which she is the object—for this love is so strong and ardent that it can properly be called passion—are considered the necessary instrument for the elevation of the soul. The boundaries between spiritual and sensual love—always difficult to define, since even spiritual love may be expressed in exalted terms—can easily be crossed; and accordingly some writers blame those who uphold the superiority of love for a woman other than a legally wedded wife because they write in the vernacular, since ordinary men are unable to appreciate the true significance of such doctrines and may well interpret them in a sense very different from the intentions of those who propounded them. Thus once again we find love breaking through into the domain of religion, so that unless it is transfigured it may disturb the contemplative serenity of religious thought. Accordingly these schools seek the same kind of justification as the Tantras, holding that *parakīya*, the love of a woman other than a wedded wife, is a means of inspiring noble and religious thoughts in men of strong sexual impulses in whom the flame of passion burns strongly. The danger of an erroneous interpretation, however, does not lie only in the difficulty of "transference", but in the fact that, in the words of a Bengali poet, "Woman is like honey: when the honey has been harvested by the bees, the flowers serve no purpose." The woman can thus lose all spiritual and emotional attraction and become merely an instrument of pleasure.

Caitanya, the great Bengali mystic—even though he too was so carried away by his impulses that he re-lived the celestial loves of Rādhā and Kriṣṇa as if they were true and real, so vividly that he lost consciousness—realised the risk to which he was exposed. Thus when, after tasting the food which Haridās had obtained for him, he learned that it had been given by a woman, he forbade his disciple ever again to appear in his presence; and when he was asked the reason for this severity he replied:









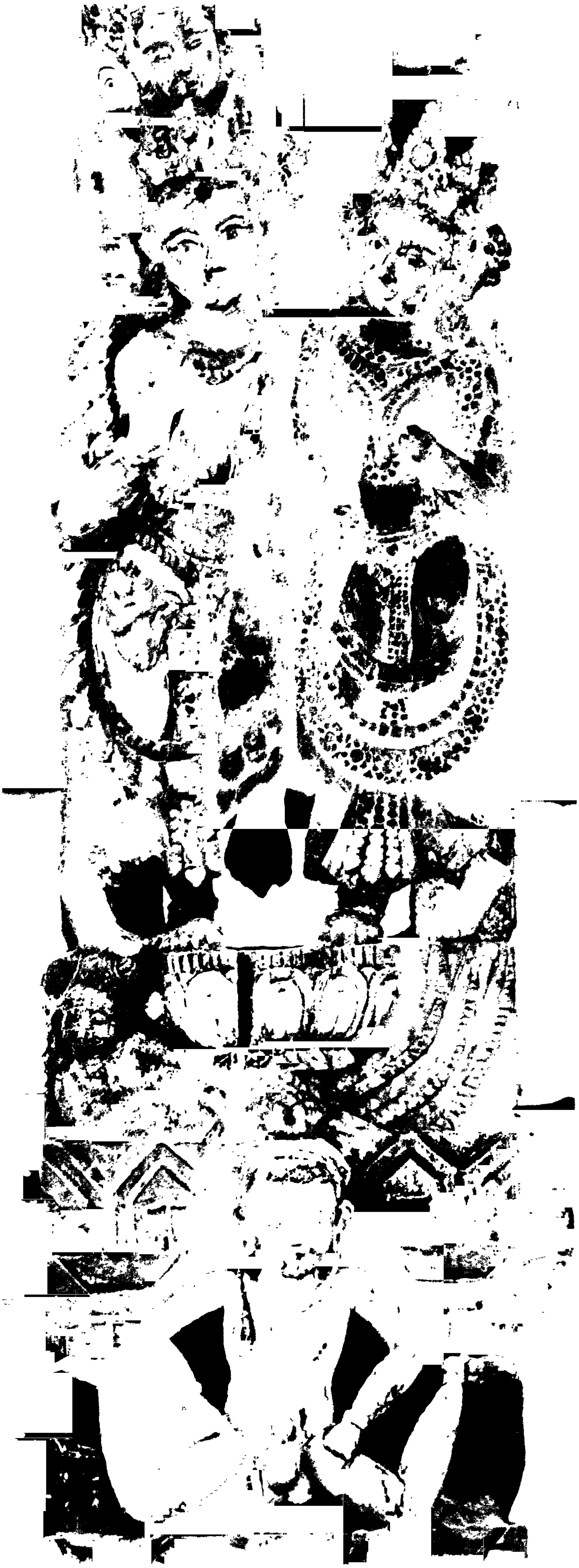


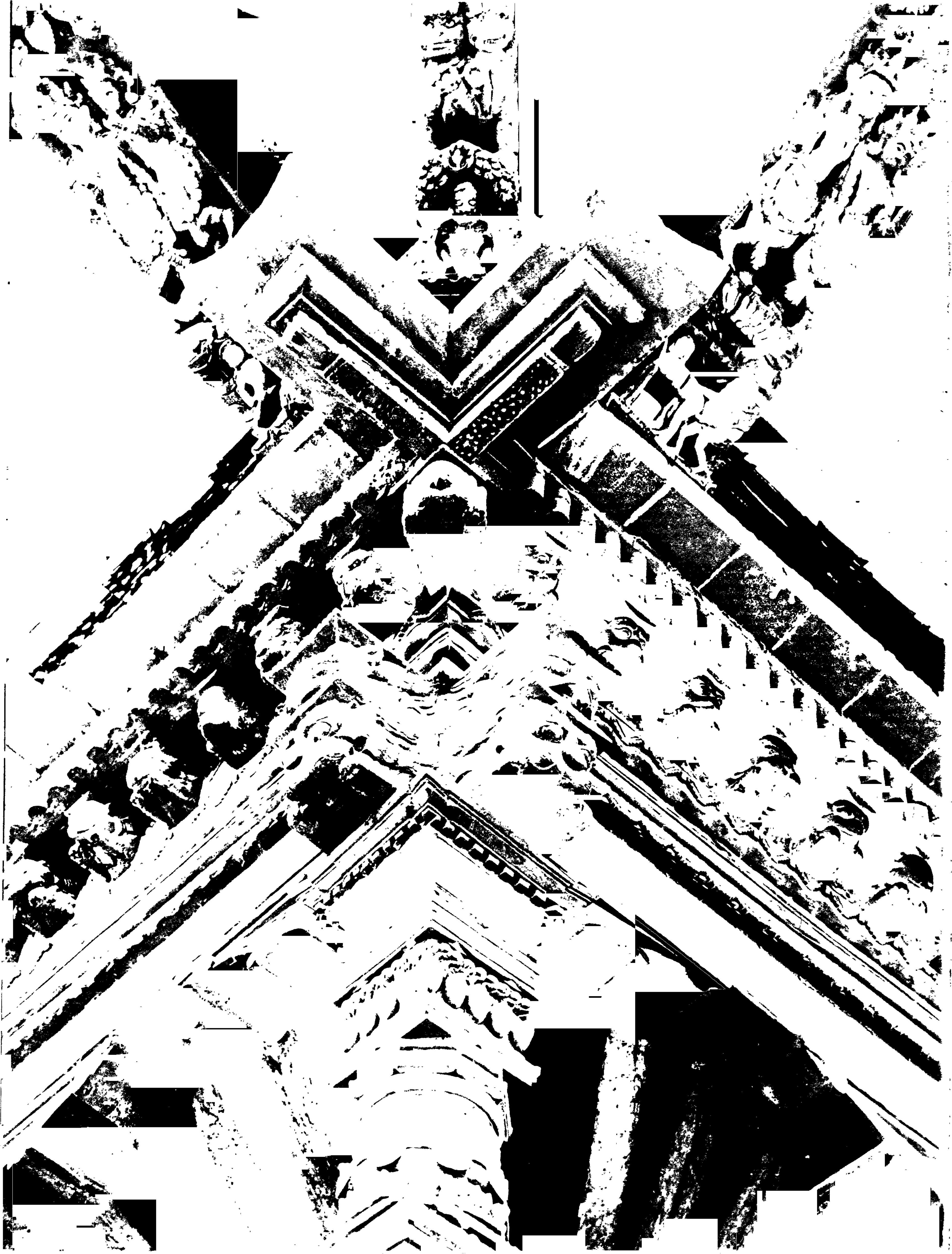










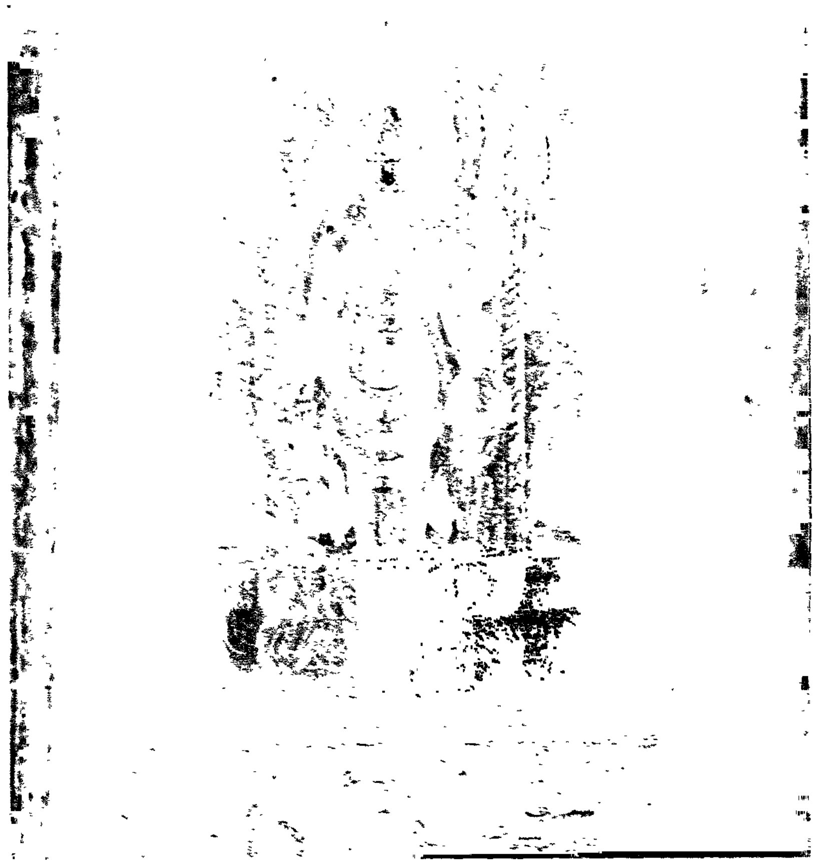



"Having become an ascetic, he speaks with women: I do not wish to see his face again. The senses are difficult to control, and become attached to the object of pleasure. On seeing the image of a woman—though it were made of wood—even a saint loses the mastery of himself, no less than an ordinary man. For it has been said: 'Let him not sit down with his mother, nor with his sister, nor with his daughter'." *(Caitanyacaritāmṛta*, II, 56).

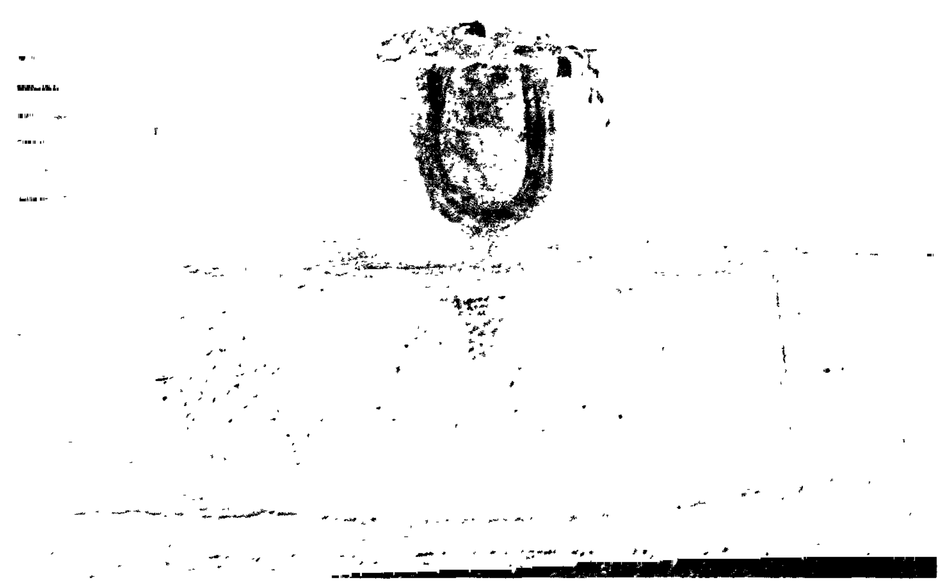
And indeed there was much truth in this; for still more serious degenerations were found in his own school. The exaltation which burned within the initiate of the cult of Rādhā and impelled him not only to contemplate in his ecstasies the amorous encounters of Rādhā and Krişṇa but also, in his impulse of mystical ardour, to assume the emotional state of the celestial bride, transfiguring his own soul into a projection of the God's consort, could—and indeed did—lead to deviations. The adept, dominated by this obsessive adoration of Rādhā which led him to imitate, in an all too human and openly erotic fashion, the feelings and actions so frequently described in the literature which was his constant study, came to believe that he had assumed the nature of Rādhā, that he had become metamorphosed into Rādhā. This was the beginning of perversions which might even, under the cover of religion, comprehend homosexual practices.

## VII

We may go farther than this. Not all the Tantras, nor every part of them, are to be taken as a guide towards liberation: many of them, no doubt, are designed for this purpose, but others begin and end with chapters devoted mainly to magic. Some, indeed, are concerned with nothing else. They may discuss, for example, the five or six means of dominating the world which are available to the man who has mastered them: thus he will be able to perform in the proper fashion certain practices designed to restore peace, as well as others for the destruction of enemies, the warding off of dangers, the performance of terrible deeds, or the submission of other men's wills to his own. This last power, which the adepts of the Tantric schools believed they could acquire, was thought of mainly as a means of securing the "submission" of a woman: that is, as a way of

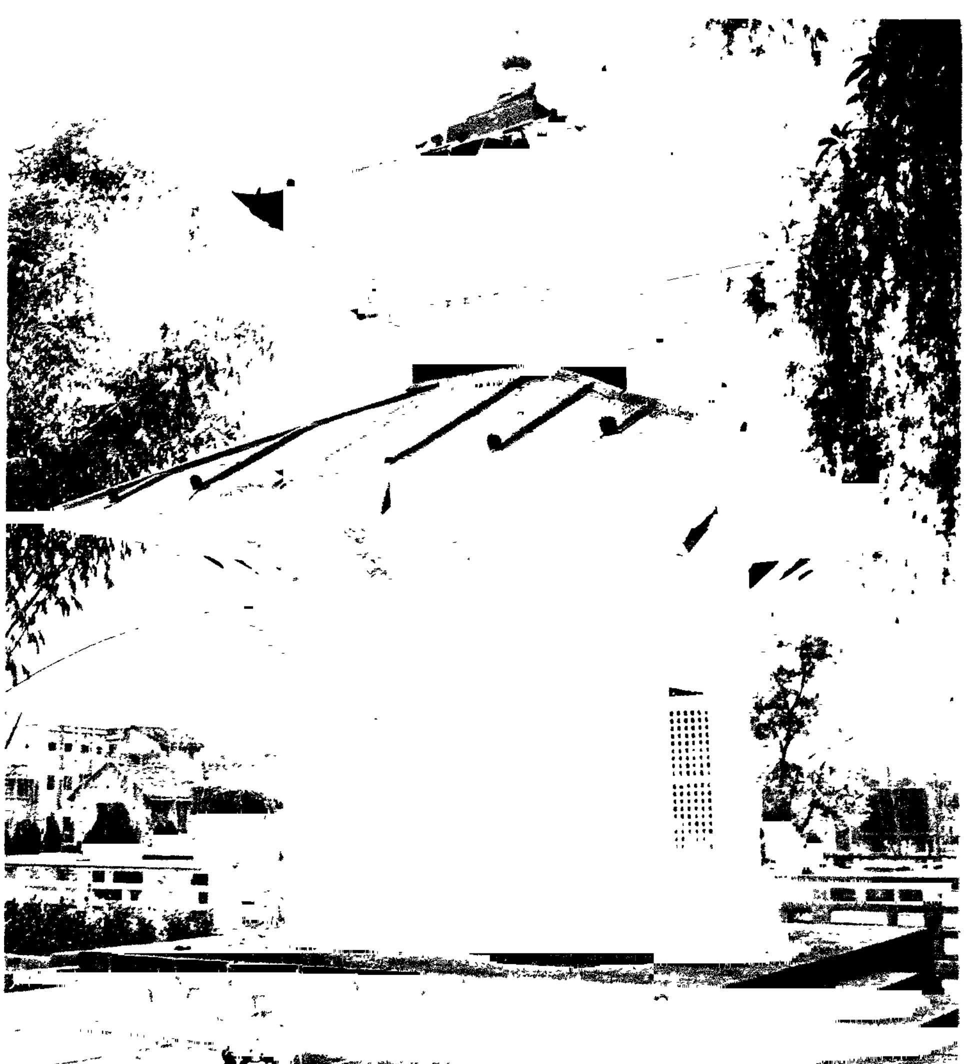


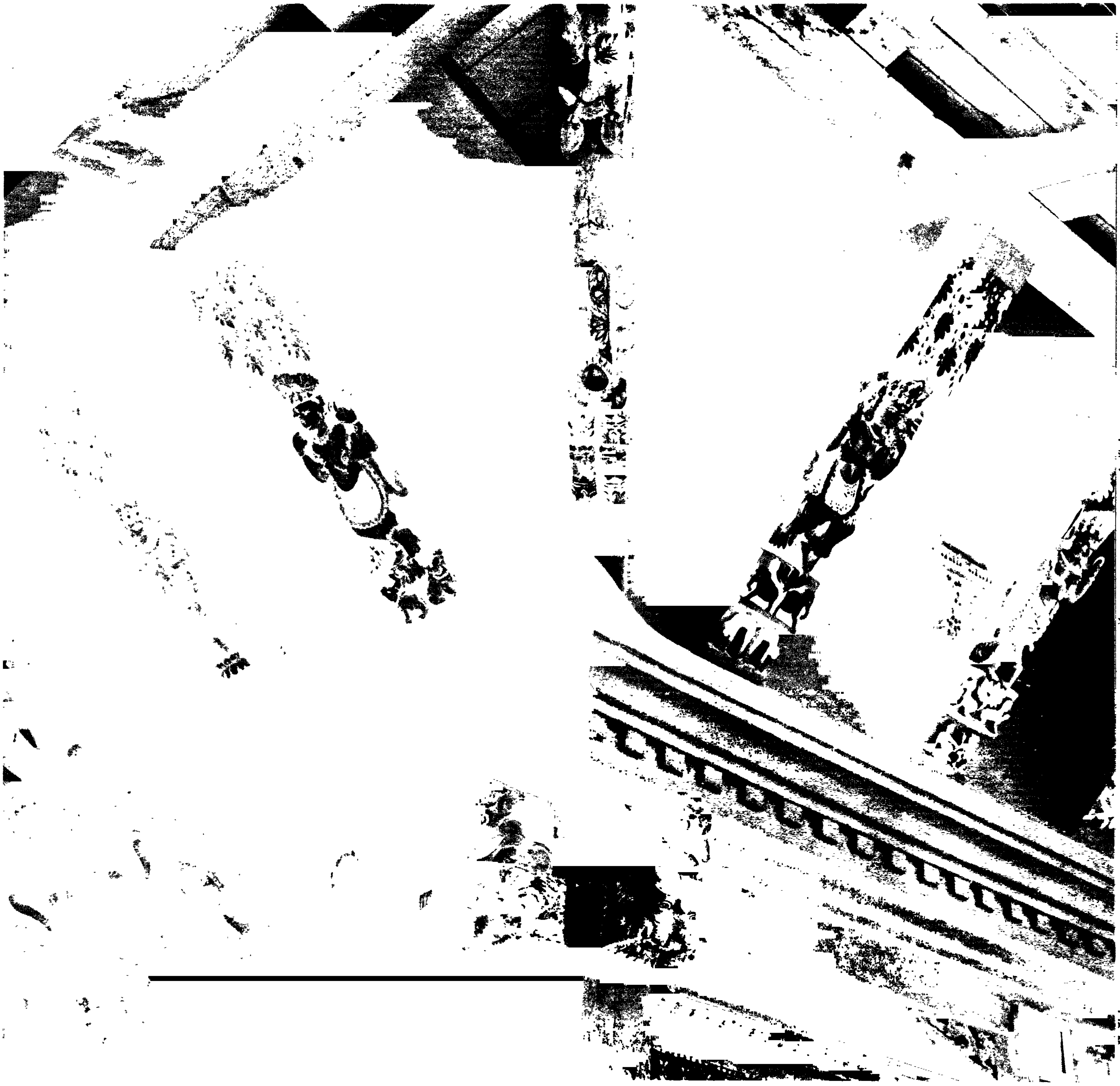
obtaining the compliance of the loved one who was reluctant to yield. In certain Tantras, too, or in texts which are half way between the Tantras and treatises on medicine, there are quantities of recipes for the manufacture of aphrodisiac pills or pills designed to delay ejaculation—matters which play a large part in medico-magical literature. In texts of this kind the invocations to the gods have sometimes a purpose quite remote from religion. Their general trend is magical, with a particular bent towards sexual magic: thus special prayers are provided for achieving success with women, for overcoming their resistance, for securing their possession. The goddess Kurukullā, among others, was believed to grant the favours of women to her devotees. As we have seen, the Tantras, though representing a form of gnosis, mingle and interweave in their teaching aspirations towards salvation and magical and erotic purposes; they do not despise the traditions, the speculations and the fantasies of the mass of the people, even those who live on the fringes of society; they accept into their pantheon the primitive and rustic divinities of ignorant countryfolk, and give a ready welcome to



the superstitions, naive and crude though they may be, of simple people, but at the same time indulge in the most sublime philosophical speculations.

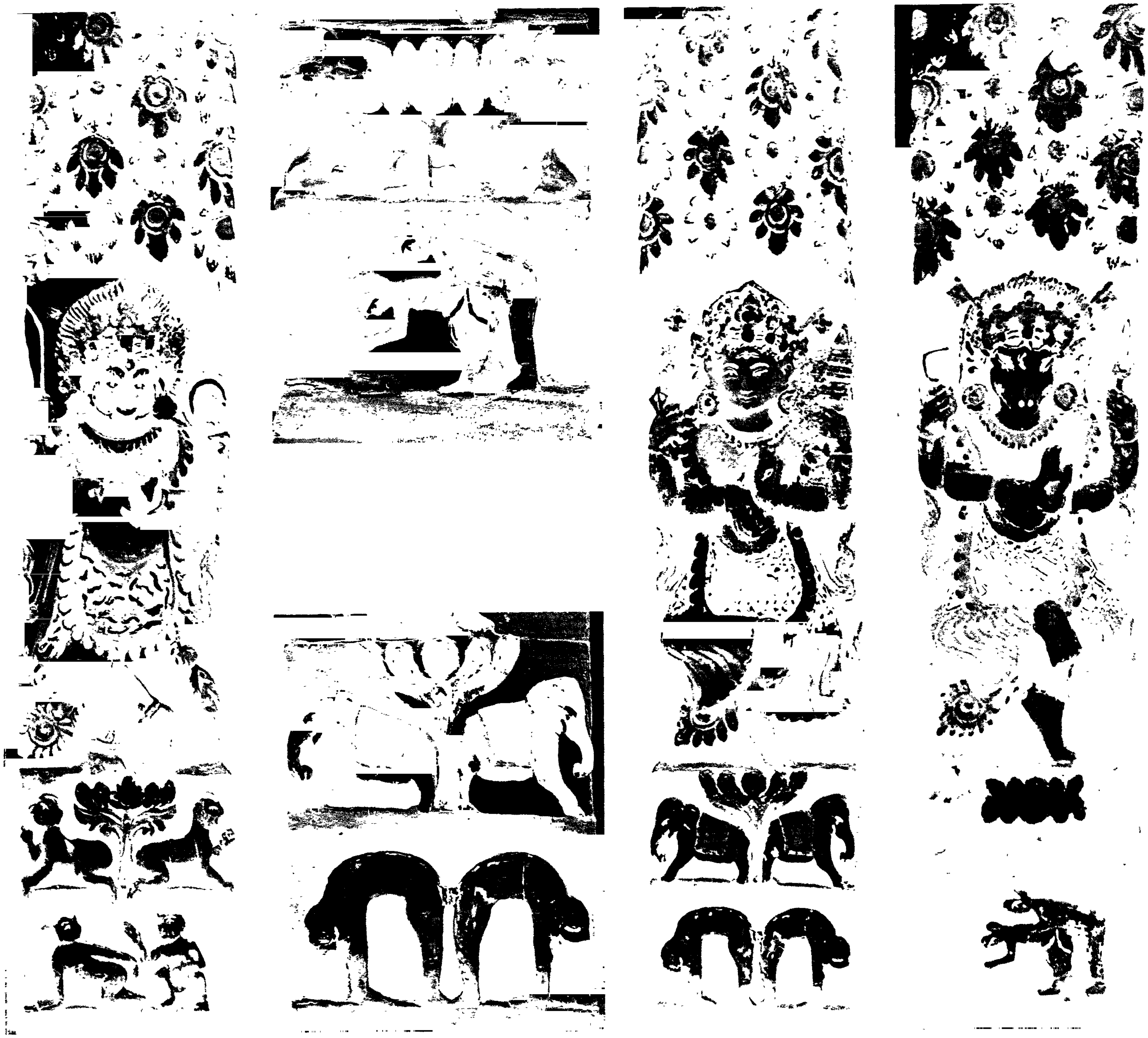
Many other sects offer examples of religious orgies or aberrations. We need think only of the behaviour of the *sādhus* belonging to the Kāpālika sect, who—in order to demonstrate that they had passed beyond good and evil and had overcome the deceitful dichotomies of the world—practised filthy and abominable rites, ate human flesh taken from cemeteries, and drank urine, faecal liquid and sperm. I remember once seeing a large crowd gathering in Nepal to watch the miracles which a *sādhu*, a great *mahātmā* (superior being), had undertaken to perform in order to demonstrate his saintliness. The demonstration turned out to be the raising a large and heavy stone with his erect penis. This may seem surprising; but in fact there is nothing strange about it if we remember that







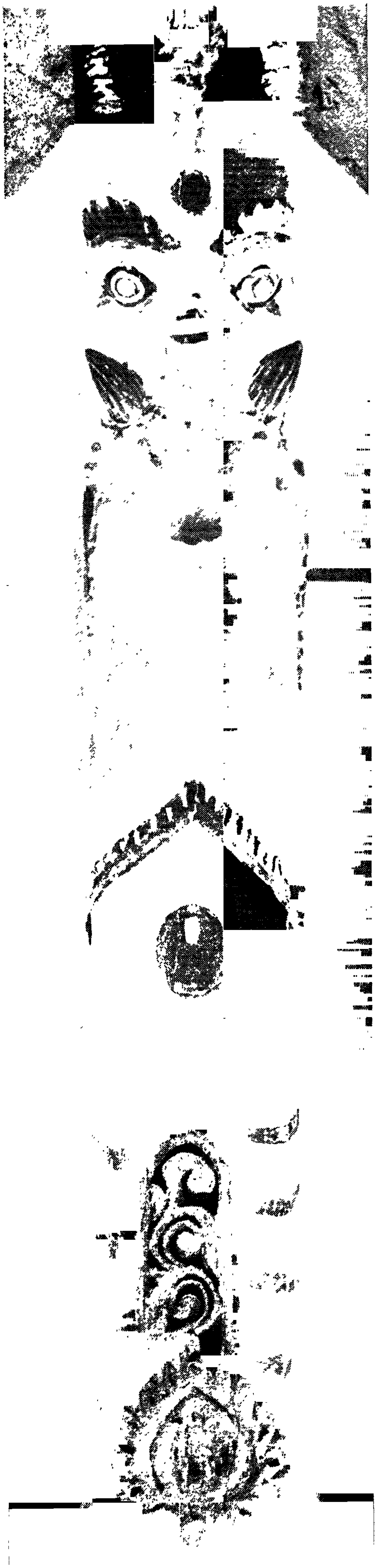




the *liṅga* is the symbol of Śiva. Accordingly in the eyes of the crowd the *sādhu's* unusual feat was proof that he had in truth earned the favour of Śiva, and that the god, in virtue of his penances and feats of asceticism, had made him a partaker in his own limitless powers. This, at any rate, is the theoretical basis: what other elements might underlie the situation is of course another matter. The practice of yoga conferred magical powers, not always directed towards the glorification of virtue or to mystical exaltations; and one of these was the power of union with the *yoginīs*, the goddesses who personified the infinite power of Śiva. The fact that this capacity, which could be obtained after long practice, is mentioned along with other powers directed towards the acquisition of particular magical qualities useful in the life of the world—perfect health, eloquence, eternal youth, and so on—leaves no room for doubt that the adepts of these schools directed their thoughts towards the conquest of young goddesses, and in default of this—which was not attainable, or attainable only in a state of hallucination—towards the winning of ordinary women, who were thought of, illusorily, as personifications of the *śakti*. Only in this way did the initiate become another god of love *(Kaulajiñānanirṇaya*, VIII, 393).

Dattātreya, a legendary ascetic to whom a temple in Nepal decorated with erotic sculpture is dedicated, was the first to recognise that he did not observe the proper standards *(anācārina)* because he drank wine and associated with women. This was the subject of debate among those who professed to be his disciples or belonged to the school which followed his teachings. The explanation, however, is provided by the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa* (XVIII, 29, 31): "O greatest of the Brahmans, thou art free of all fault, and the mother of the universe (that is, the woman who lived with him) is pure of all sin: like the rays of the sun which touch (without defiling themselves) the Brahman and the untouchable." This signifies that the *yogin* has passed beyond good and evil, and the rules which govern others are not applicable to him, since his behaviour transcends the standards and the understanding of ordinary men: that is, they have a meaning which only the adept can comprehend.



# VIII

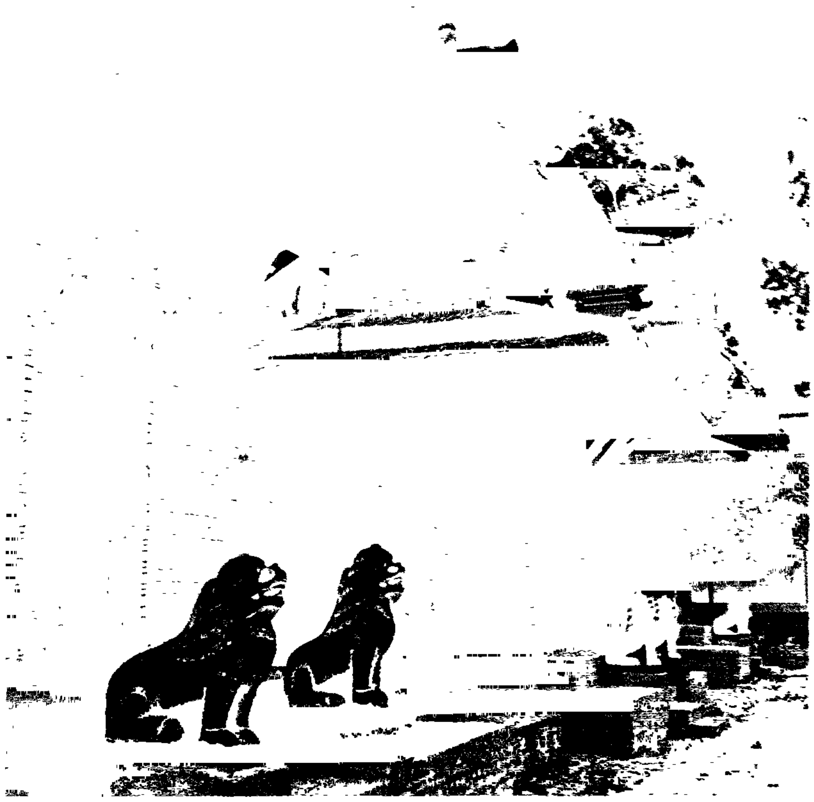
It is clear, at any rate, that *eros* is present everywhere, whether crudely expressed or conveyed by implication, whether suggested allusively or modestly veiled. There is no better expression of its omnipotence as the matrix and motive force of the universe, no clearer summary of the preceding discussion, than the words of Varāhamihira: "This whole world, from Brahmā to the worm, is held together by the union of male and female. How shall we think shame of this when God himself (Śiva) was constrained by his passion for a young girl to assume four faces (in order to look upon her)?" (*Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, LXXIV, 20).

The world is a bisexual organism *(pulliṅga* and *strīliṅga):* that is, it bears the mark of both masculinity and femininity, as if divided into two bodies *(dve tanū)*, later identified with Śiva and Śakti, which were basically identical in their primal androgyne state, became separate in order to produce and

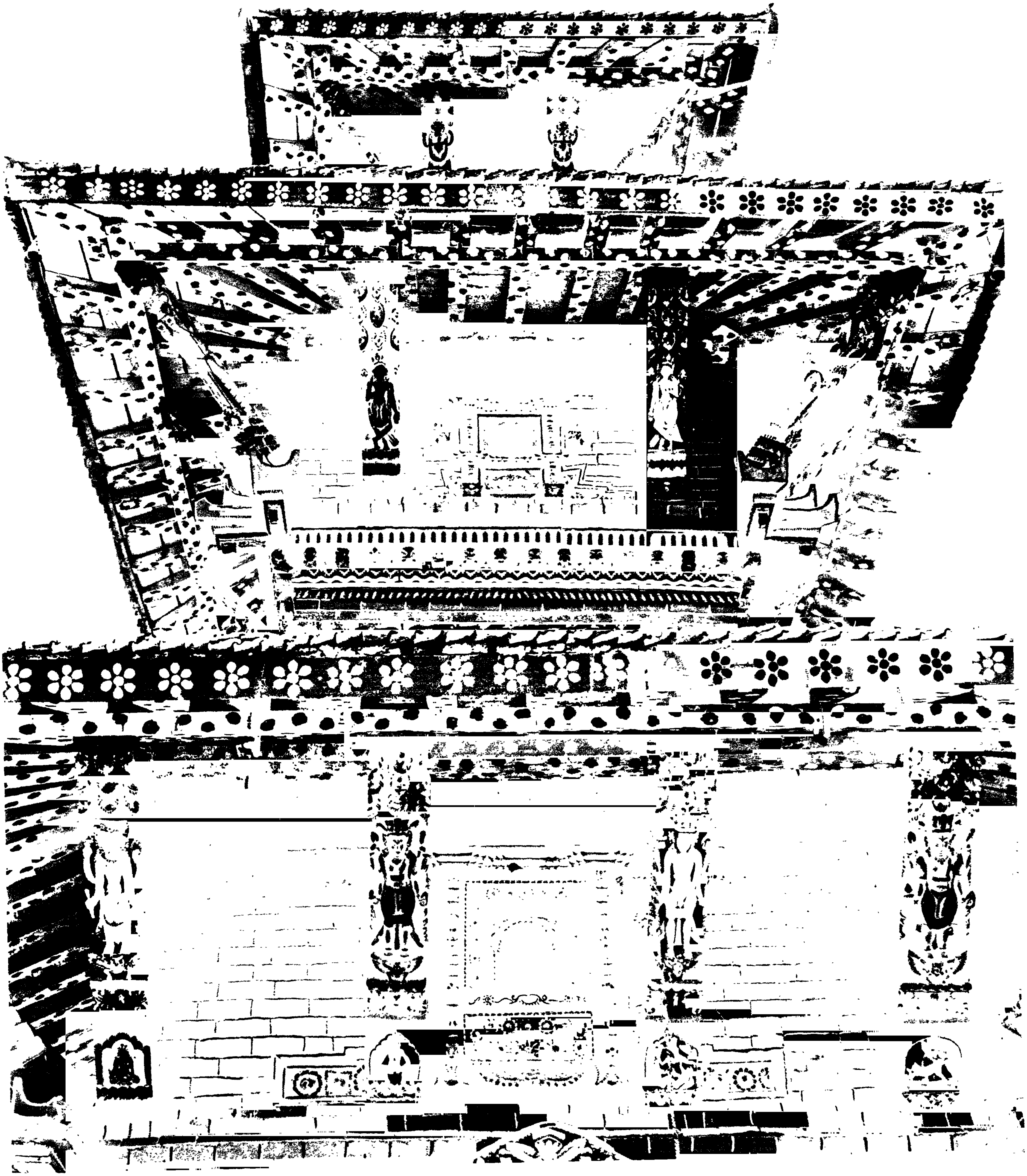
guarantee the inexhaustible rhythm of cosmic life, but are always striving towards integration outside the bounds of time. This ambivalence of the creative force explains why a change from one sex to the other, in either men or gods, is a recurring feature in the legends, without appearing improbable or extraordinary. It must be noted, however, that this reduction of all things to the effect of an irresistible vital impulse also explains the principle accepted as the basis of behaviour in India, that there must be no interference with life *(ahiṃsā)*. This is because to destroy life is to run counter to the work of the *śakti*, to the inexhaustible creative urge which regulates the development of the universe. Death has its place in the scheme of things, but only as an element in the perpetual flux in which life and death necessarily alternate and provide justification one for the other: inseparable and concomitant, one evoking the other, but as phases in the process of "becoming" in space-time, not as discretionary powers in the hands of man, who is called on only to take cognisance of this cosmic vicissitude in its fatal necessity. In other words, man must not intervene, in the exercise of his own will, to destroy the life of created things—and thus to take on himself the mysterious operation of the *śakti*—unless his religion commands him to do so, as it does in the case of the bloody sacrifices required by certain divinities. In such a case, however, the reasoning is different: an injunction is laid upon him, for these sacrifices have an invigorating and fortifying effect on the divinities, who are in reality manifestations of the invisible power which thus manifests itself to men. Thus the supreme energy from which all things flow and in virtue of which all things continue is not interrupted or halted by these acts, but rather supported and reinforced.

# IX

The almost obsessive recurrence of the terms *liṅga* and *yoni* in this essay, the sexual ardour expressed in the many myths I have briefly referred to, the exaltation of woman—these features are not the result of an arbitrary choice or deliberate selection on my part. Under the structure of speculative thought, merciless, dialectical, ruthlessly denying the *māyā*—which implacably conceals in its deceiving coils the ineffable One, always seeking to liberate itself for ever from the *māyā* and to reintegrate itself—we find the subtle web of legend woven by a religion based on the experience of the masses and perpetually fluctuating between the two poles of sex and death. Hence its concupiscences and its terrors, its invitations and its threats, its allurements and its denials.

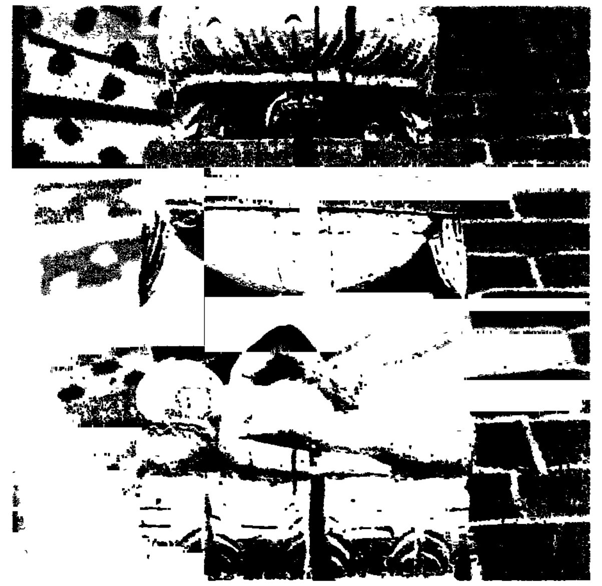
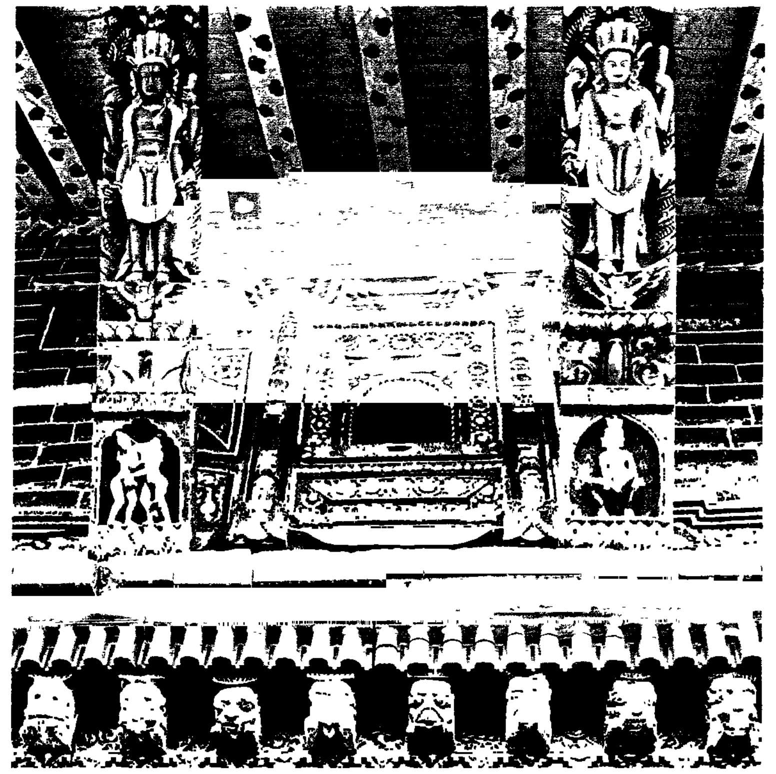
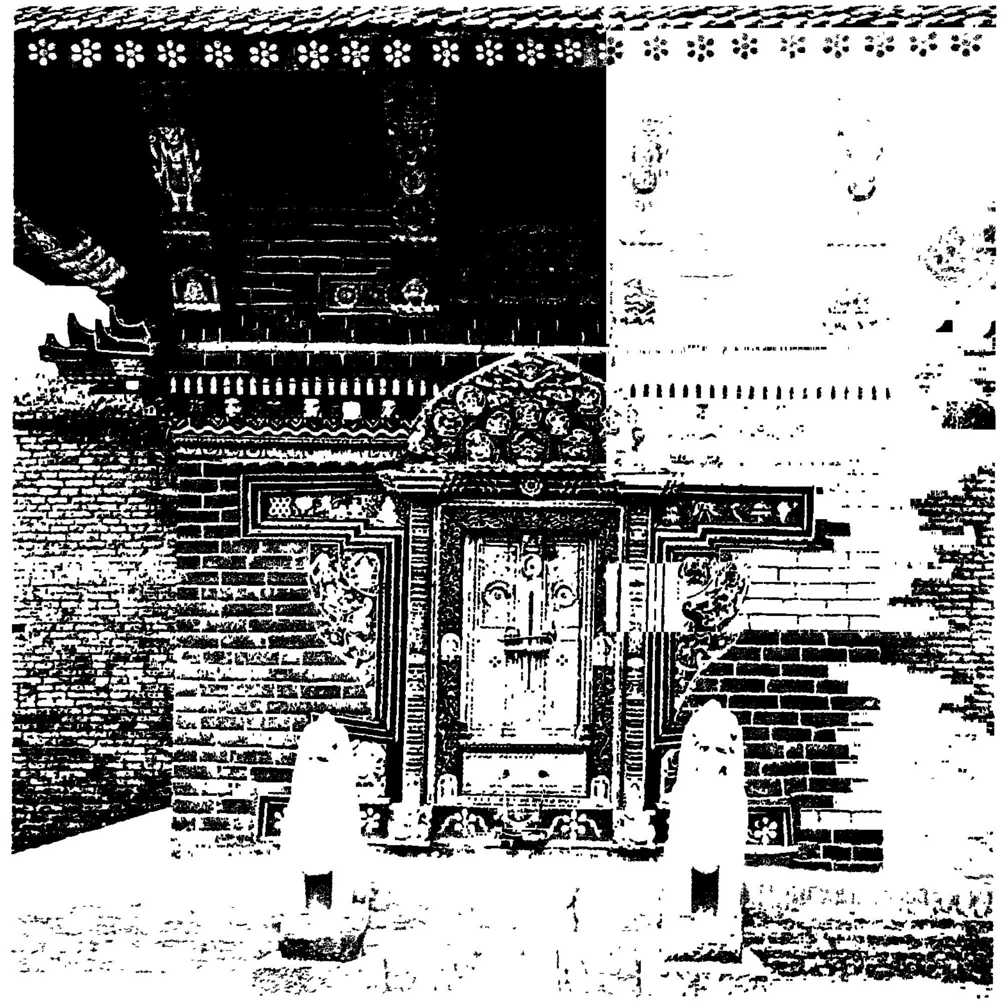
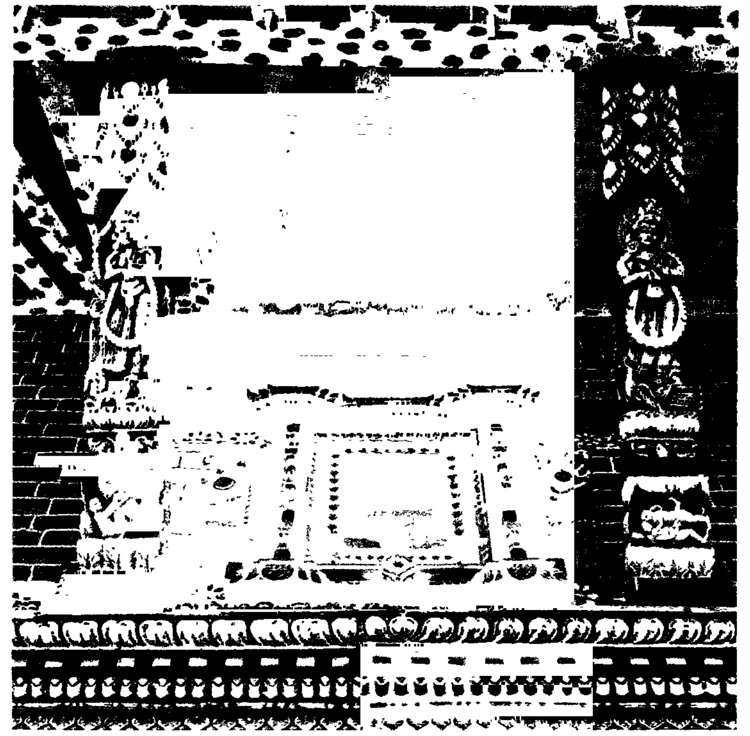
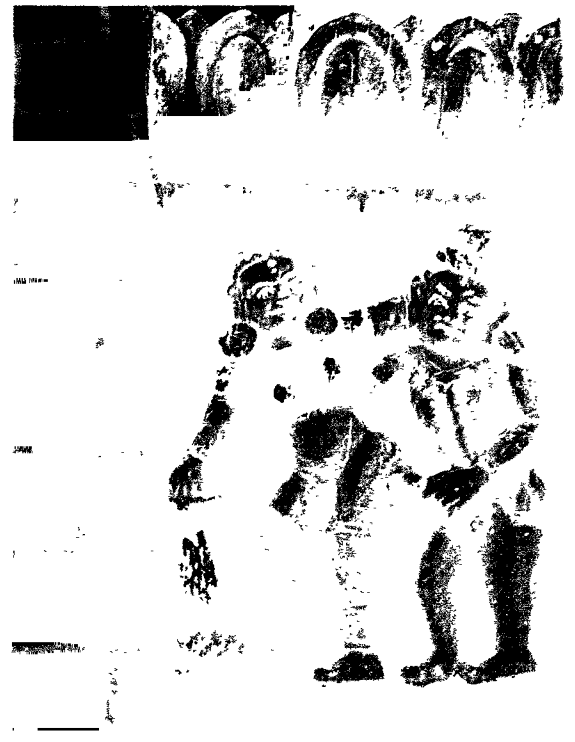


And here we reach the essence of the religious intuitions which the masters take as their raw material and ennoble with their bold speculations,





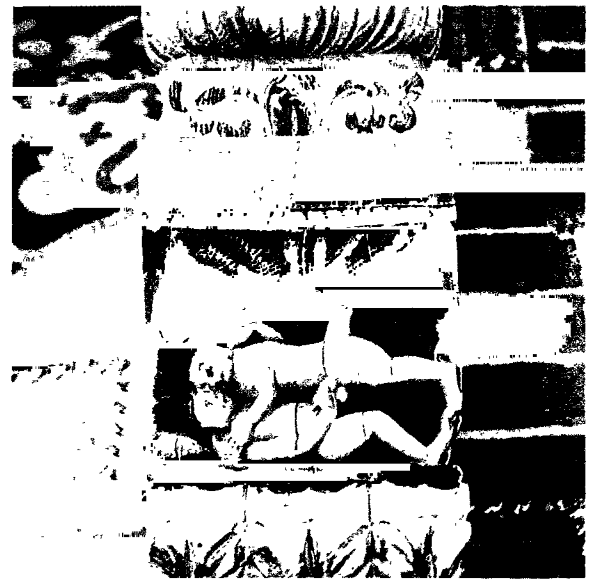














and which yoga does its best to transfigure, transforming the impulses of instinct into an instrument of salvation.

Thus we see delineated with extreme clarity the uniqueness of Indian religious experience, in which, as in the jungle, all things co-exist and live together, neither rejecting nor excluding one another; and we see the same contradictions in many of their gods, at least in their usual representation and interpretation: symbols of life or of death, the convergence of opposite polarities which yet cannot be dissociated from one another. In sex alone lay the guarantee of the continuity of life. Barrenness was seen as the greatest peril threatening the family, and medical skill and the Tantras were equally concerned to seek its cure; for if the family line failed the ancestors would be deprived of the ritual offerings which ensured their survival in the world beyond the grave. Accordingly sex was glorified as the eternal challenge to death and non-being; encouraged rather than repressed; transfigured, no doubt, but not denied. It is an innate, cosmic, irresistible urge, but it is also consecrated by religion and reflected in speculative thought as a symbiosis which cannot be dissolved. The gods themselves are avid to live, for they may fall from their divine estate; but even if at the destined end of the cosmic ages all things are destroyed in a general conflagration or by a process of reabsorption this disappearance is not final, but is merely a period of repose or a return to an undifferentiated state, to be followed by a fresh beginning, in a series of cycles which has no end.

Such are the premisses required for an understanding of the collusion between the sacred and the profane, the portentous co-existence of opposites, which is revealed in the Indian conception of life. The Indians have a totally different view of the creative act from ours. The sexual act has its proper place in religion: it is not to be concealed but to be exalted as the repetition of a process which is continually renewed, the celebration of the *hieros gamos*, the sacred marriage of the primal divine couple, the aspiration towards a return to the archetypal androgyne, the absolute and undifferentiated potentiality of male and female.

In countries like Nepal and India where death was always and everywhere lying in wait, in the form of epidemics, the fierce heat, drought, torrential rain, the dangers of the jungle, the threats from wild beasts, the recurring floods or wars, these symbols of the eternal process of creation represented the unconscious but inevitable affirmation of life in face of the fragility of the human creature. It is not without reason that one of the most ancient Indian religious texts puts death and hunger at the origin

of the world, for death or hunger is the creator of all things and its first creation is time—that is, the cycle of life and death *(Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Up.*, I, 2, 4).

At every moment death claims its victims, and the Great Mother receives into her bosom the very beings which she herself has created; but life nevertheless inexhaustibly pursues its continuous and sorrowful course. *Liṅga* and *yoni* are more than the symbols of a creative act performed at a given time. They are not merely the opposite of death, they are its negation, the inevitable emergence of a new creation born of destruction, the constantly renewed birth of created beings, in order not merely to satisfy the ruthless urgencies of death but to enable Being to reassert itself in face of non-being. Hence the dominance of *kāma*, *eros*, in both the physical and spiritual senses, over all created things. From Vedic times *kāma* is the seed *(retas)* of the mind, for everything in life is love. Already in the *Nāsadāsīyasūkta*, one of the most splendid hymns in the Rigveda (X, 129), *kāma* is seen as the beginning of all things, the first effusion from the heart of the primeval One. And the Upanishads *(Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Up.*, IV, 4, 5) repeat that man is consubstantial with *kāma*. A poet in the Atharva Veda celebrates it as the first of all things to be born, not to be equalled either by gods or Fathers or men. "Thou art superior to them, and for ever great." It exists in itself *(ātmabhū)*; it is uncreated, "born of no-one".

The Indians are thus entitled to the credit of being the first to discover the *libido* as a primal force, the *eros* which asserts itself in an infinite range of modulations, a challenge to death, an affirmation of the ego *(ahaṃkāra)* which projects itself towards created things and finally is exalted in the union of the sexes to ensure the eternity of life.

There is nothing surprising in this. The Indians, who were the precursors of many of the philosophical theories of the West, also anticipated some of the latest theories of psychoanalysis. They even knew the Oedipus complex, if certain Tibetan theories reflect Indian ideas in maintaining that after the period of existence intermediate between death and a new life the psychic individuality of a creature about to be reborn will feel affection or hate for its parents according to the sex assigned to it: hate for the mother and love for the father if it is to be born a female, or aversion for the father and desire for the mother if it is to be a male. Similarly from the very beginnings of their speculative thought the Indians were intuitively aware, however vaguely, of the existence of the *libido* as the supreme motive force of human actions. They went still farther, recognising that this *libido* was not restricted



to human instinct but was revealed as the supreme cosmic force: it was not merely an impulse of the individual, which could be contained or diverted by the course of social and moral evolution, but, more generally, was the prime motive force in the production and renewal of all things that exist and pass away on earth and in heaven. Like a vibration which never dies down, it is an impulse *ab initio* which, through the uninterrupted dialectic of man's evanescent existence and the perpetual recurrence of the ages, stimulates and informs the limitless possibilities of existence. This *kāma* or *eros* or *libido*, by whatever name we choose to call it, is thus a force which explodes in an infinity of forms, in all the varied manifestations of its inexhaustible and ever-changing nature, eternal yet always new. *Kāma* is the "first born", the first desire of Prājāpati, the "supreme creator"; and the whole of creation is the result of a desire (*so 'kāmayata, Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Up.*, I, 2, 5–6). Kāma, as a god, is the Lord *(prabhuḥ)* or the "master of the world" *(jagatpati)*, and proclaims himself "the immortal and indestructible".

Death and hunger are the shadows which loom over man. As we have already noted, death is not only a point at which man arrives but a departure point as well, for from death is born the desire to exist. *Thanatos* is the inseparable companion of *eros*. It is omnipresent; it was in the beginning, is now and always will be, not only in the continual disappearance of created things but in the form of hunger: "Here in the beginning there was nothing: all things were covered by death, or by hunger; for hunger is death" *(Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Up.*, I, 2, 1). This identity between death and hunger explains the importance attached to food from the time of the Upanishads onwards. This was later developed into a myth in the form of the Great Mother, *Annapurṇā*, known as "She who is overflowing with food". But this food is also seed: "the animals are born from seed", and accordingly seed is a form of food. This explains why nature is seen as something to be enjoyed: "He who enjoys is the individual, and nature is that which is to be enjoyed" *(Maitrī-Up.*, VI, 10).

This eternal antinomy between hunger and food, between death and life, between *kāma*, which gives rise to all things, and *thanatos*, which masks and destroys and overthrows all things, is the very fabric of Indian thought and religion—particularly of religion, in which the idea is expressed with the most unbridled fantasy and in the sharpest terms.

The presence of death, the companion of life and the inseparable attendant of pleasure, is depicted in many representations in Nepal. In a fashion which recalls (though with a different significance)

certain works of Western religious art, as for example at Pisa, they incorporate in their erotic scenes, or at least work into the background, images of skeletons, wasted figures or decomposing corpses. The convergence of *eros* and *thanatos* appears clearly in the mythical figure of the god Māra. The name (from the root *Mṛ*) means "death", but Māra is also the god of love, Eros. A well known story tells how the Buddha had no sooner attained illumination at Bodhgaya than Māra sought by every means in his power to disturb his newly achieved serenity and distract him from the way he had chosen. He sought to move him not only by threats and by fear but also by appealing to his senses, introducing wanton girls into his presence. Māra represents the fundamental unity of the two themes of love and death which are eternally interwoven. Death is nourished on *eros,* and *eros* is the perennial opposite of death: when I love I provide nourishment for life, I oppose death but at the same time I offer a fresh bait to its insatiable voracity; if I die *eros* will see to the filling of the void. This will be so for all eternity, so long as the universe shall endure, in a cycle which has no end, like a serpent biting its own tail; for the universe is made up of the alternation of these two supreme forces. Thus Śiva and Pārvatī die in their supreme embrace but are at once reborn as *liṅga* and *yoni.*

# X

In Hindu dogma, therefore, life is divided into four parts, both in its ends and in its social architecture. These four parts are the moral and religious law *(dharma)*, practical activity *(artha)*, liberation or release *(mokṣa)*, when life is on the wane or the sense of the vanity of things proves stronger than the passions, and finally *libido (kāma)* in its infinite forms. However some authors, like Bhoja, consider *kāma* the supreme motive force of all things: love of self, love of the Law, love of practical activity, and love of love, the motive force of the universe, the urge which gives rise to all things and governs all things. This leads him into an acute and subtle disquisition, a classification of the various forms of love in all its aspects, this complex pattern of attractions, of human and amorous impulses, of mystical exaltations and of passions. In all he enumerates sixty-four different manifestations of love, interpreted in the widest sense.

There is a world of difference between the puritanism (or rather the theoretical precepts) of the Brahmans, who as early as Vedic times were dismayed by the phallic cults of the native populations on whom they imposed themselves, or the elect circle of thinkers who wove the fabric of one of the loftiest philosophies known to man, and the inheritance, never forgotten or destroyed, of the older religious thought. The ever recurring mystery of creation, of the continual birth and death of created things, at once inflamed and abashed the imagination, for life was always associated with the image of death, the power which creates with the power which destroys; and presiding over the whole structure were the Great Mother, from whose womb all things emerged and to whom all things returned and Śiva, to the rhythm of whose dancing worlds were born and in due time consumed

by the exterminating fire. Confronting this reality, man was struck with amazement and terror, trembling lest hunger and death should carry him off for ever; and then he returned to the beginning of things, to the germination of everything from nothing which is expressed in the elemental impulse of sex. And so the *liṅga* and the *yoni* became established as concrete symbols of the uninterrupted processes of life. These conceptions and the forms in which they were expressed or suggested were bathed in an erotic aura which was frequently censured and condemned by the theorists, but was

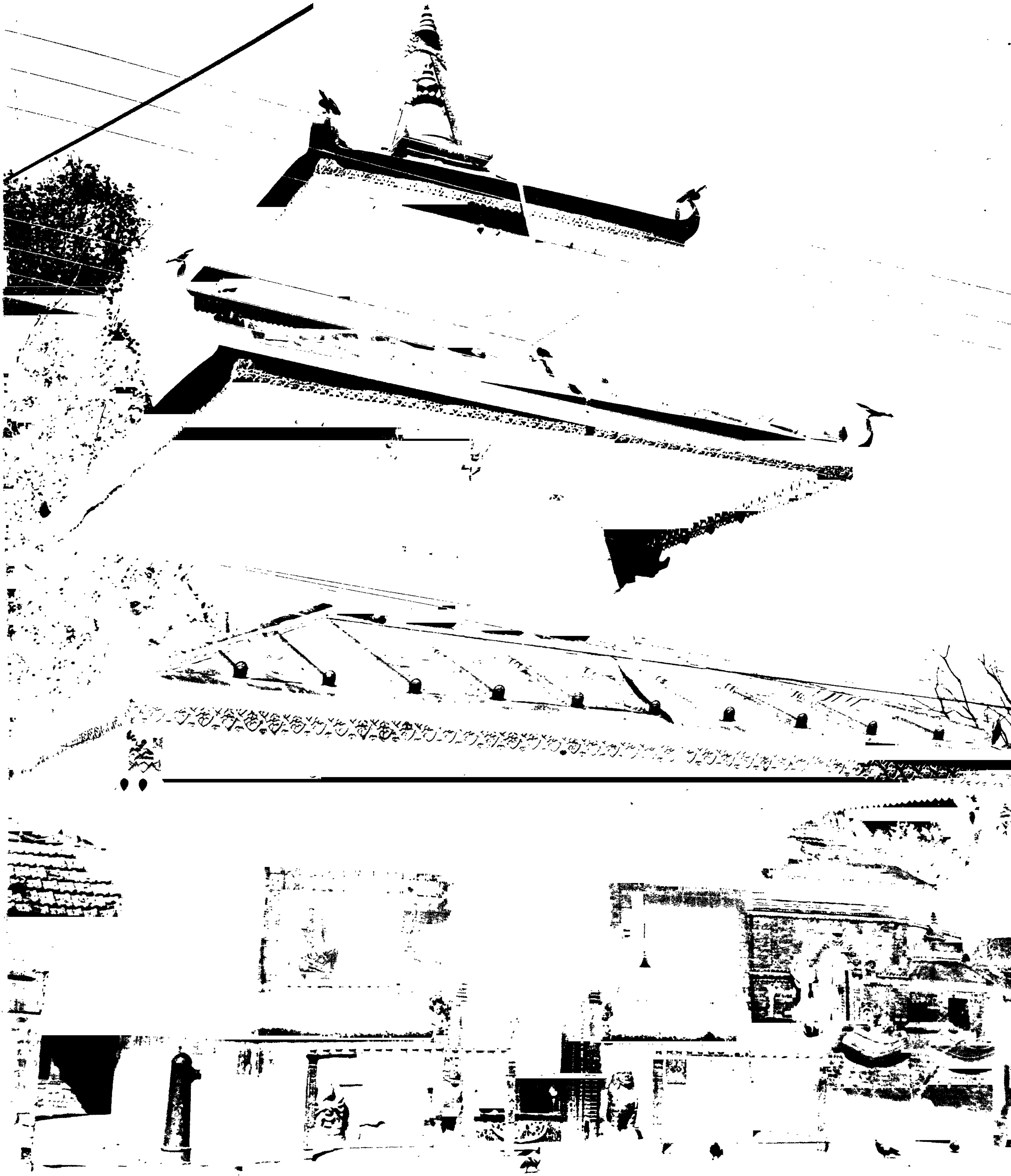


nevertheless accepted as something which existed and could not be suppressed. The puritan opposition was frequently no more than a matter of form. To a large extent Brahmanic society was based on casuistry and compromise; it was founded on *dharma*, the rule, but the rule was never rigid. As a well known passage in the *Mahābhārata* says, what is precluded and prohibited *(adharma)* at one period of life may be permitted *(dharma)* at another: in other words, what is licit and what is illicit varies according to age and to place. In consequence *kāma*, having been accepted as an essential component of life, becomes the object of minute and detailed study—as always happens in India, a country which has always been given to subtle debate on anything and everything. It is not correct to regard India as merely a land of ascetics: this erroneous view is a legacy of the romantic stories which achieved currency in Europe when India was first revealed to the West with all the sumptuous riches of its philosophy. The India of the Buddha, of Mahāvīra, of Śaṅkara and of the ascetics must not cause us to forget the real India, the India of the masses in which everywhere we find the same human creatures—enjoying the pleasures of life and praying; losing themselves in mystical exaltations but often, even in their philosophising, starting from materialistic premisses; annihilating the world

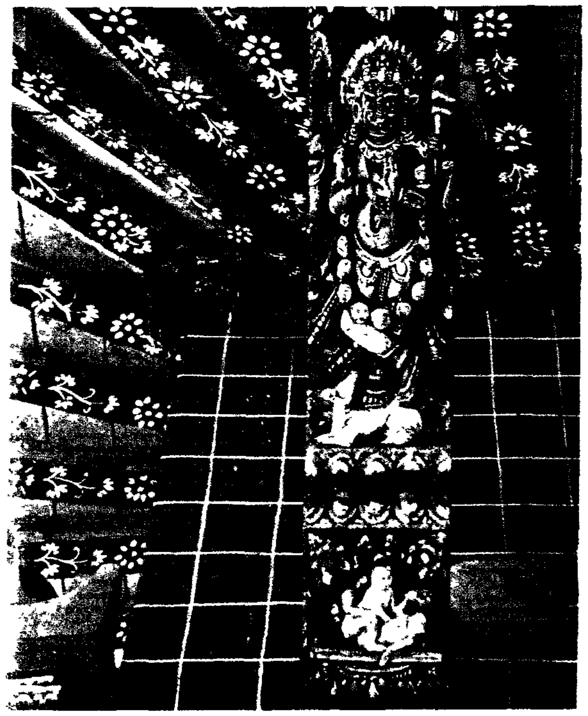
in a motionless and undefinable transcendence, but scrutinising reality with a sharpness of observation hardly surpassed by the Greeks.

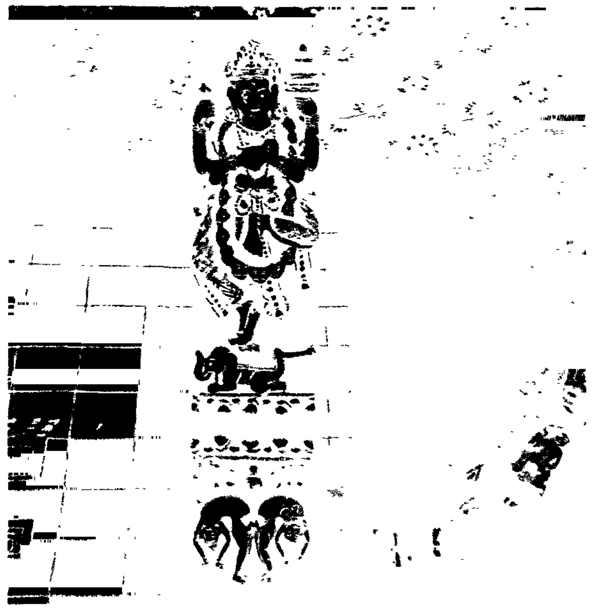
*Kāma* is an instinct belonging to man and inseparable from him, for *kāma* is life itself: it is an essential part of him, born with him. The practice of *kāma* is, therefore, a proper subject of discussion and demonstration. This is the origin of the *Kāmasūtra*, perhaps the first scientific study of manners in this particular field; for it not only classifies the different forms of sexual relationship but also records the sexual habits of the various peoples of India with scrupulous accuracy. And indeed Vātsyāyana and the other authors who concerned themselves with these customs did not write for the purpose of satisfying unwholesome curiosity: they were in no sense pornographers, and it is a complete misunderstanding to regard them in this light. The *Kāmasūtra* and other works of the same type were not written to stimulate libidinous thoughts but to expound with proper scientific rigour the whole subject of the sexual instinct and its various manifestations. Moreover the discussion of the art of love takes its place in a larger context which is centred on conjugal life. In order to make possible a well-matched and happy union man and woman are classified and defined according to their disposition and their principal somatic characteristics. The sexual act itself is described and exemplified in all its morphological complexity, with due regard to the object it is designed to serve and a clear understanding of what is suitable for conjugal life and what is inappropriate to it. The acts falling into this latter category are not, however, ignored, for they are found in certain places and circumstances and accordingly can properly be recorded and catalogued. Since, moreover, all things and all practices — from the techniques of all the various industries and crafts to the habits of thieves and procuresses—are subjected in India to theoretical discussion, anything that exists in human life and is thus a fact becomes an aspect of reality and a proper subject of research and study. Thus to regard the *Kāmasūtra* as a work of pornography is to attribute to it a character which it does not possess and to judge it by standards appropriate to our own day rather than to the time when it was written.

The matter is, however, more complex than this. *Kāma* signifies more than love: it is also an expression of the aesthetic sense which is innate in man and of all that can satisfy or educate that sense. Although the *Kāmasūtra* was—and indeed still is—considered in Europe as a book unsuitable for young people, it was in fact required reading for young girls before marriage, evidently with the







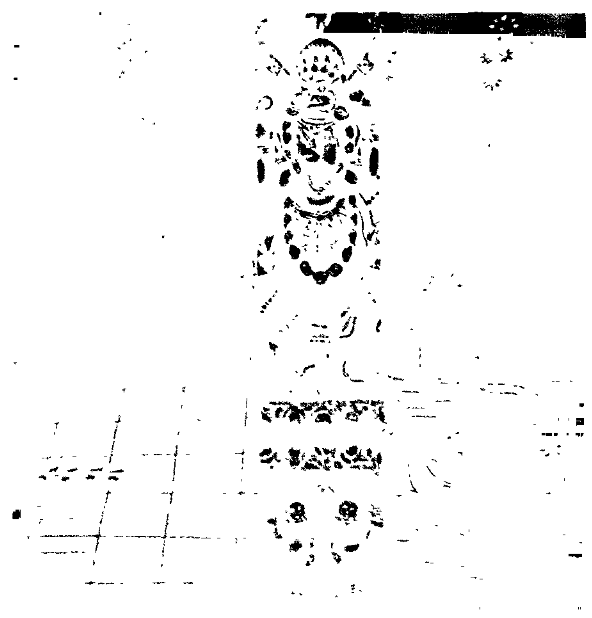




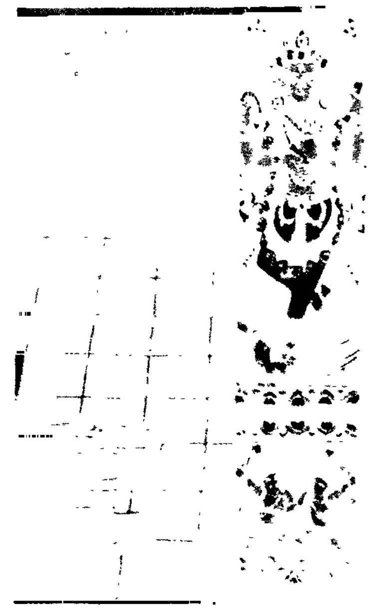
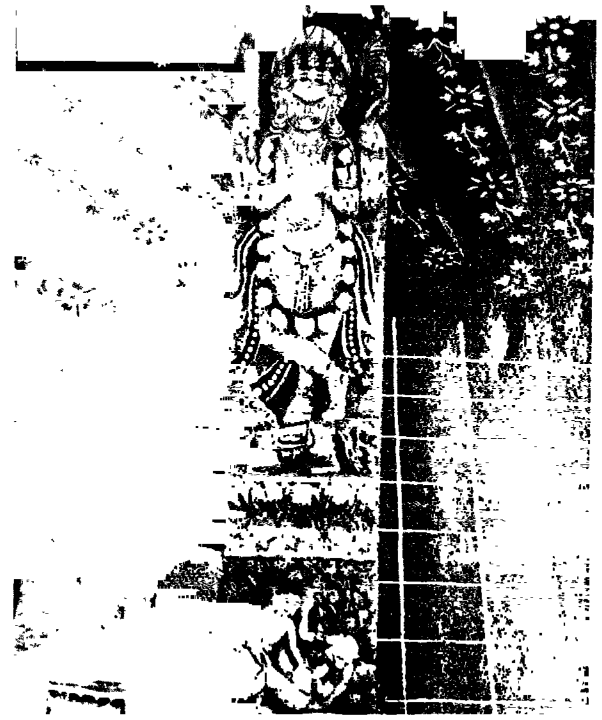


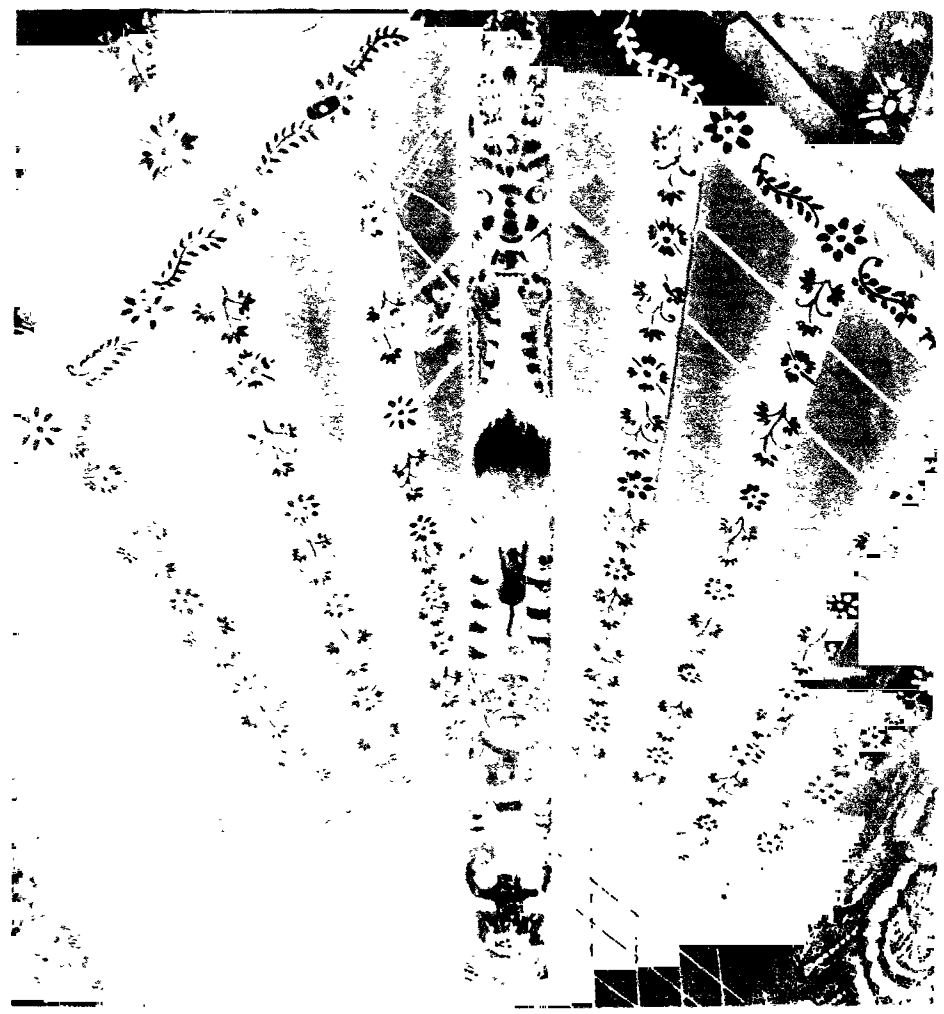








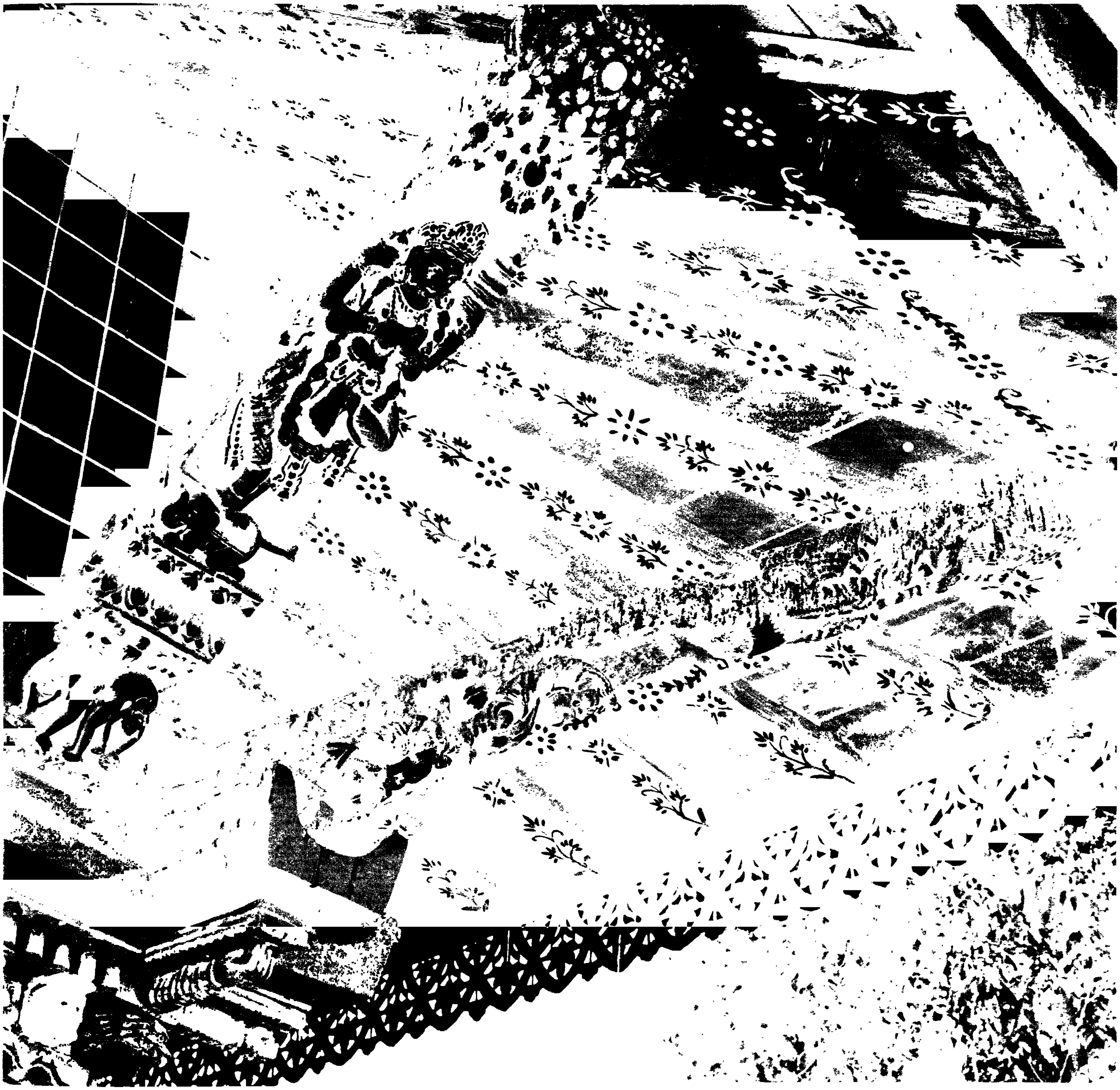



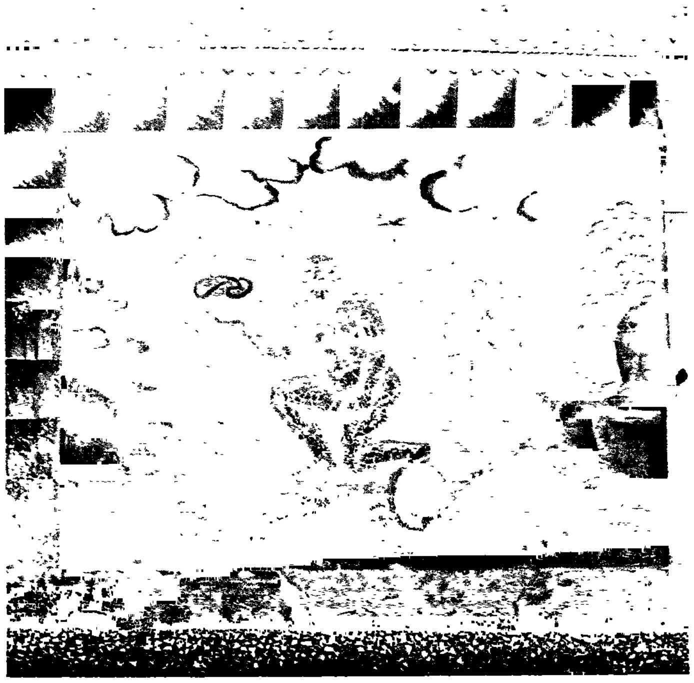




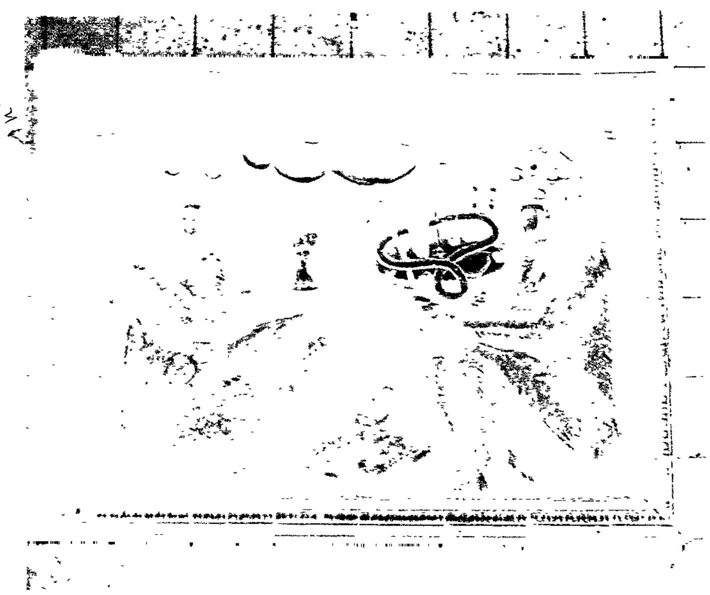


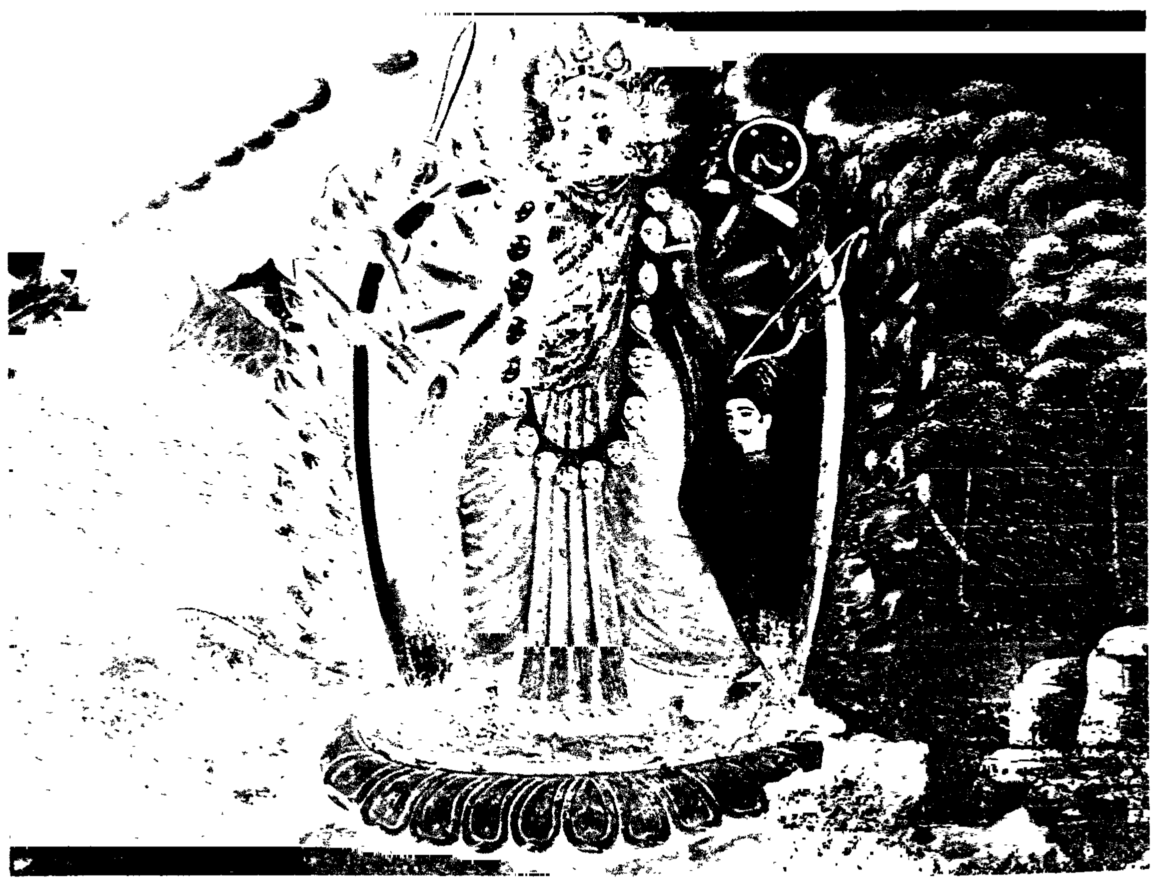




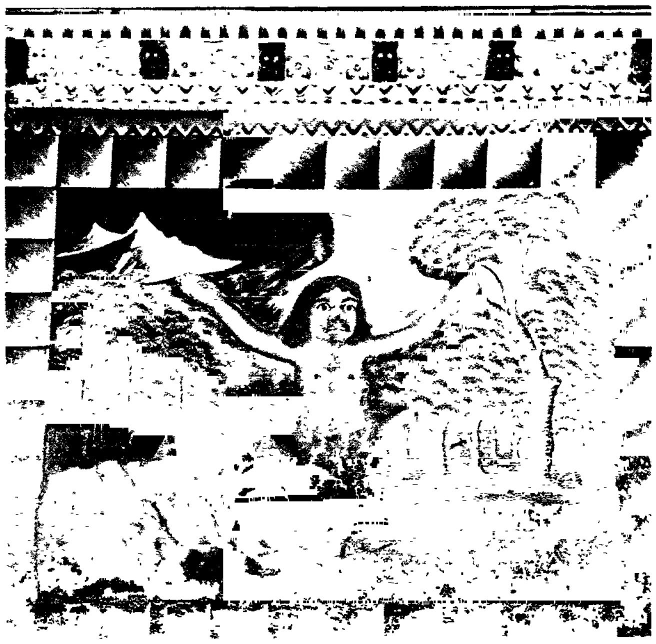


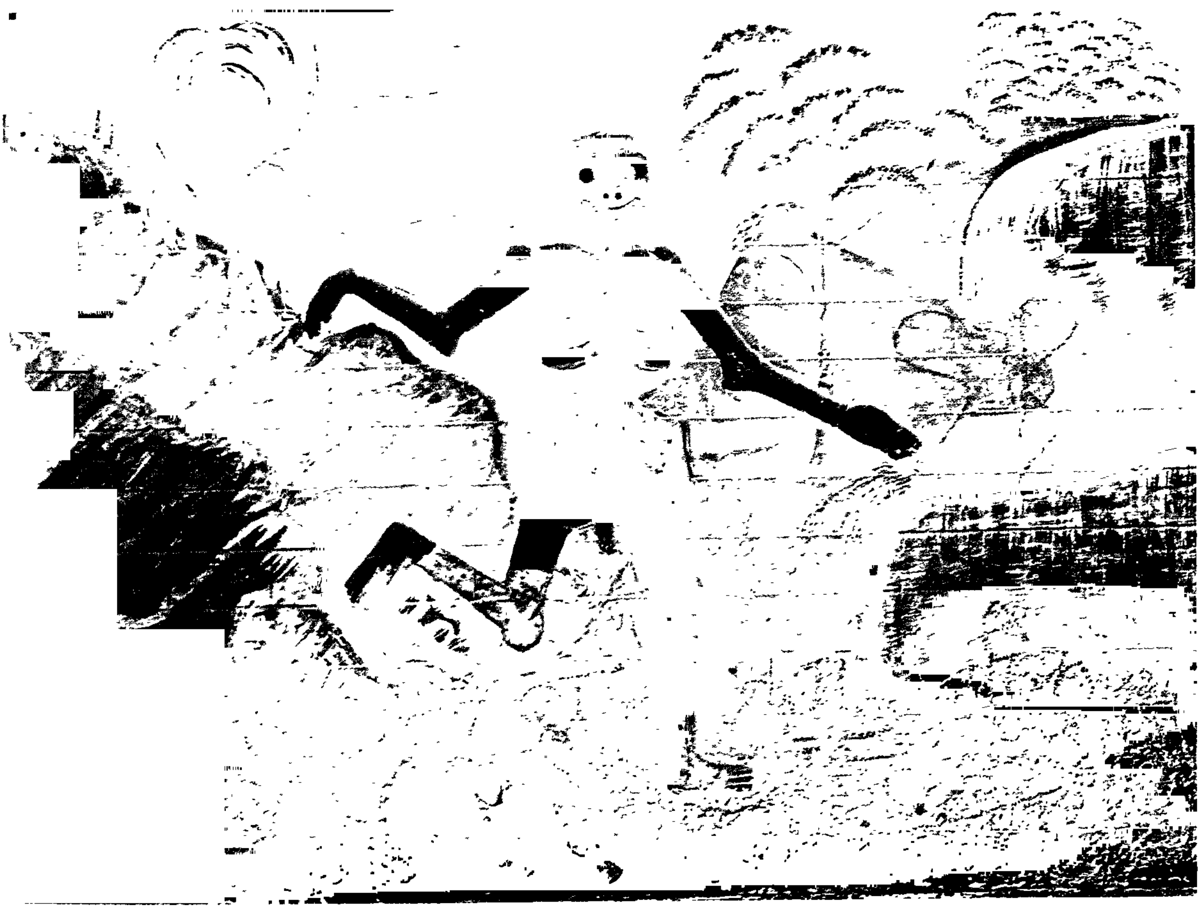


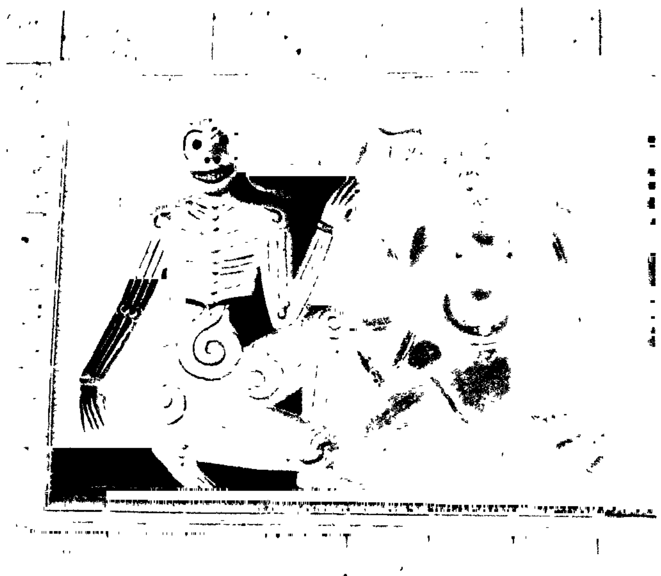














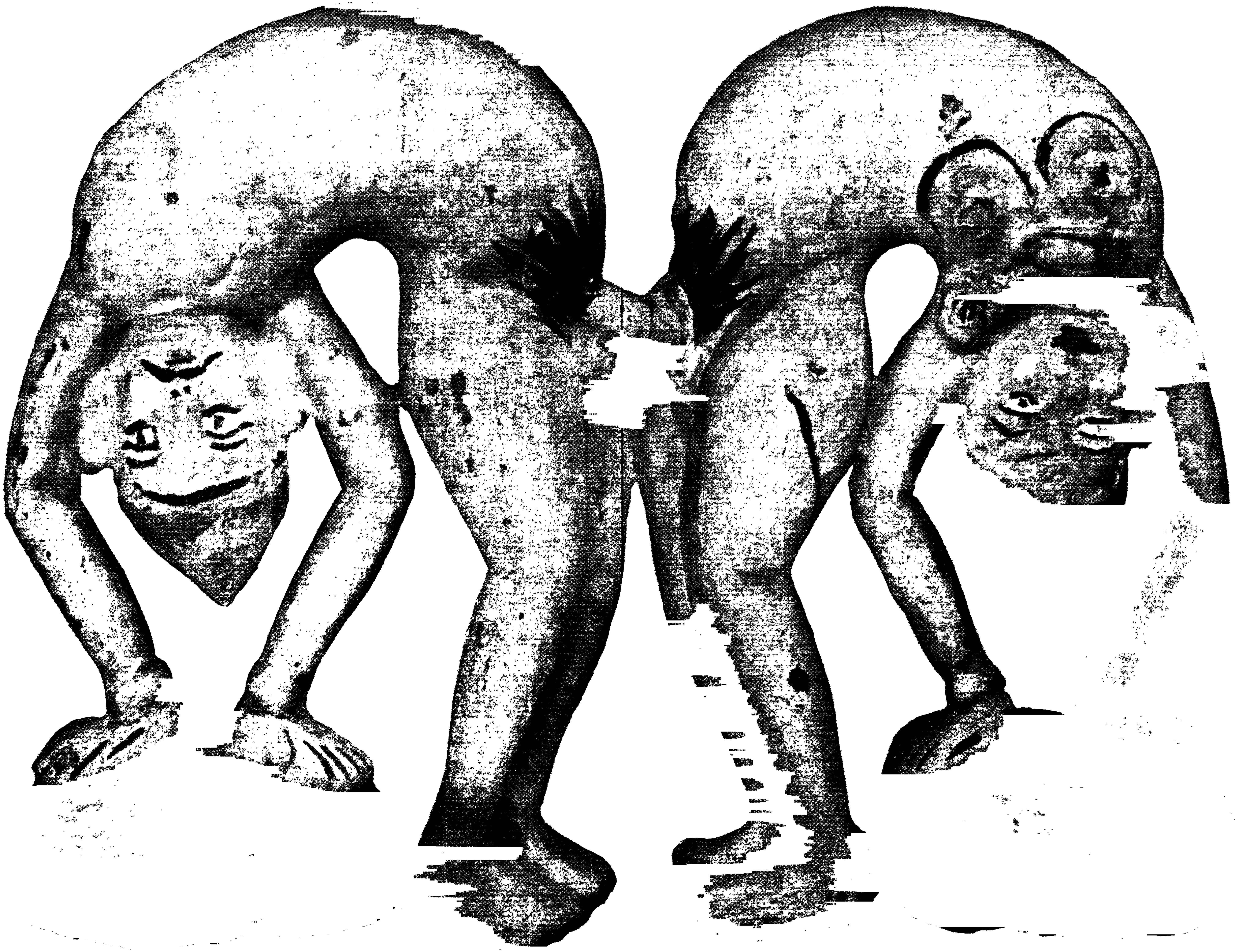




approval of their parents (I, 2), and after marriage with the approval of their husband. It was a kind of textbook of premarital sexual education, not regarded as at all unsuitable for well brought up girls; for at the same time as they were reading the *Kāmasūtra* they were required to devote themselves to the various social accomplishments which were in a sense its complement—poetry, riddles, and the art of reading aloud in the appropriate tone of voice.

As we have noted, there were inevitably deviations and perversions. Evidence of this is provided not only by allusions in the *Kāmasūtra* itself but by the sculptured representations on certain temples like Khajuraho and others in Orissa and Nepal. The practice of masturbation is attested by Vasiṣṭha and by carvings in the same temples, and the *Kāmasūtra* refers openly to it, as well as to the special customs of women in certain parts of India who used the *olisbos (kṛtrimayantra)* or practised lesbianism. Even in the rules of monastic discipline, which were read on occasions of public confession, there are references to the sin into which the nuns might fall of allowing the rain dripping from the roofs during the wet season to fall on their private parts. We also hear of orgiastic rites performed in common by certain sects in which the sacral element was purely nominal. The lawyers and even the Purāṇas, from Vasiṣṭha to Baudhāyana and Manu, held out the threat of sanctions against sexual perversions, and these sanctions could be extremely severe, involving for example loss of caste. According to other authors, however, the sinner could expiate his sin merely by washing his clothing. Elsewhere again women found guilty of lesbianism could be punished by fines or by a whipping. But everything depended on the time and place: the sculptures of Khajuraho and Orissa, together with a number of literary documents, make it clear that these injunctions were often more honoured in the breach than in the observance, and that in practice a considerable measure of tolerance was shown. In any event—to take only one particular instance—if men coupled with animals, as we see in certain temple carvings and as we read in the *Kāmasūtra*, they were merely following the example of the gods. According to legend, indeed, one of the most celebrated ascetics in India was born of the union of Śiva with a cow.

We may note also that in general, and particularly during periods of relative political security and economic wellbeing, the rigorous principles of *Dharma*, the Law of Hinduism, were subject to numerous exceptions; and the casuistry natural to all dominant classes was always ready to turn a blind eye to its austerer precepts. On the one hand there took place in the country areas, among the peasants,



the untouchables and the native populations on the fringes of Hinduism, annual festivals or licentious cults which the orthodox affected to ignore—or indeed sometimes incorporated into their own religious calendar; and on the other, in the towns, young men of good family and good upbringing *(nāgarika)* enjoyed great freedom and were very much in the way of visiting prostitutes *(veśyā)*, many of whom were women of education and refinement. We need not, therefore, be surprised at the extraordinary proliferation of treatises on love; nor at the fact that they were written in Sanskrit, the learned language which was accessible only to those who had received the higher education enabling them to read and enjoy these works.

Prostitution was tolerated by the state, and its organisation is discussed in one of the most famous Indian treatises on politics, the *Kauṭilīyārthaśāstra.* We learn, for example, that it was a significant source of revenue for the national treasury—though, as might be expected, the greater part of the trade escaped all control.

The mingling of sacred and profane which we have already observed is also illustrated by the *devadāsī*, the "handmaidens of the gods", who danced in the temples in honour of the gods, but in fact represented a form of prostitution carried on under the protection of religion. We read in the "Book of the Procuresses" *(Kūṭṭanīmata)* how when Prince Samarabhaṭa visited the famous temple of Viśveśvara (Śiva) in Benares the *devadāsī* who plied their trade there came to meet him and received him with the honours due to his rank. The dancing master who was responsible for their training warned him, however, not to expect too much from them in that difficult art, for the greater part of their time was devoted to amorous encounters.

When Albiruni visited India in the 11th century in the train of the conqueror Mahmud of Ghazni he wrote a book which is still an inexhaustible fount of information; and he too marvelled to find prostitutes in the service of the gods. As a Moslem he was scandalised at this sacrilegious association between the mysteries of religion and the frailties of th flesh. He was scandalised, like so many European travellers after him, simply because he had not understood the polarity immanent in the religious experience of India, the symbiosis—so difficult for us to understand—between divinity and sexuality which had developed on the favourable soil of the *libido*, though always haunted by the omnipresence of death, the duality of *liṅga* and *yoni* on the one hand and on the other extermination, represented by the bloodless and emaciated goddess Camuṇḍā. In the figurative language of Indian

religion this bipolarity is expressed in the image of the Great Goddess, who is at the same time she who gives life and she who kills, Durgā and Kalī: she who holds sovereign sway in the Indian pantheon along with Śiva, whose strength she is, adored by the masses and taken as a symbol of the *śakti*, of the forces of existence in its endless evolution and change, of the inexhaustible magical release *(māyā)* which is engendered in God and arouses in him the intoxication of creation and the fury of extermination, the desire to witness the realisation of the world of archetypes which he contains within himself and to reabsorb it into himself. "Then," we read in the Upanishads, "he was filled with love, and thought: 'O that I may multiply myself, that I may create!' And he practised ascesis, and when he had practised it he caused the universe to emanate from him." And so the myth was born.

The Great Mother whom the ignorant masses saw represented in the temples, sometimes mild and sometimes terrifying of mien, and whom they worshipped with mingled love and fear, reflects in her characteristic symbols, whether joyous or terrible, intuitions of considerable profundity. She expresses the cause and the reason of the process of "becoming" which works through the dialectic of procreation and elimination, the two phases which are indissolubly linked because they take place only in the realm of "becoming", in the *māyā*, the endless flux which is the magical operation of the *śakti*, the supreme synthesis of *eros* and *thanatos*. Hence the terms in which she is celebrated by Rāmprasād:

Always, O Mother, thou dancest in the battle!
Never has been seen beauty to equal thine
When, with loose flowing locks,
A naked warrior, thou dancest on Śiva's body.
The heads of thy sons, severed day by day,
Form a garland round thy neck;
Dismembered human limbs hang at thy girdle.
Resplendent are thy lips,
White as jasmine flowers thy teeth,
Brilliant as lotus flower thy face,
Yet terrible in its eternal smile.
The colour of thy limbs is like a storm-cloud,
And marked with bloodstains are thy feet.
Says Rāmprasād: My soul is like a man who dances;
My eyes cannot resist such matchless beauty.

One of the finest hymns dedicated to her, however—*Mārkaṇḍeyacaṇḍī*—invokes her in these words:

O Mother, who renewest the sufferings of him who invokes thee, be propitious;

Be propitious, O Mother of the Universe, be propitious, O Queen and support
of the world.
Thou, O Mother, art queen of all that moves and all that is inert.
Be propitious, O Goddess, ward off from us the fear of enemies;
Wipe out the sins of the world.

The universe is the sport and the respiration of God, an ebb and flow in which all created things appear and disappear, the endless pulsation of time, the desire to exist which is nourished on its opposite.

These are the foundations of Indian sensibility and thought, expressed in a lively variety of images and symbols. The eternal creation is represented with the instruments of its realisation; the duality of the sexes finds its way into the temples and is sublimated in speculation; the world is sexuality in action. There is no escape from it, whether it creates new lives in the infinite multiplicity of its manifestations or is sublimated into a means of salvation. As we have already noted, man is a body, and in spite of its frailty the body has a double potentiality—the potentiality of being and the potentiality of transfiguration.

Sexuality thus contains the germ both of terrestrial man and of the being which transcends humanity. We can have either life as it is, with its urge to renew itself, or a "transference": there can be no question of repression. Outside these two possibilities there is only ambiguity and falseness. Even life in society reflects the perpetual conflict we have described between unbridled sensuality and morose orthodoxy—an orthodoxy, however, which did not prevent the Brahmans from regulating their lives as they pleased.

There are countless examples of aberrations by Brahmans; for they were not exempt, any more than were the gods themselves, from the overmastering urges of passion. Thus Parāśara, crossing the River Yamunā on a ferry steered by a girl of great beauty named Satyavatī, was suddenly smitten with love for her, and in spite of her resistance induced her to lie with him. Of this union was born one of the most celebrated poets of India, Vyāsa, who is credited with the authorship not only of the largest collections of Indian epic poems but also of many other cycles of legendary and religious poetry.



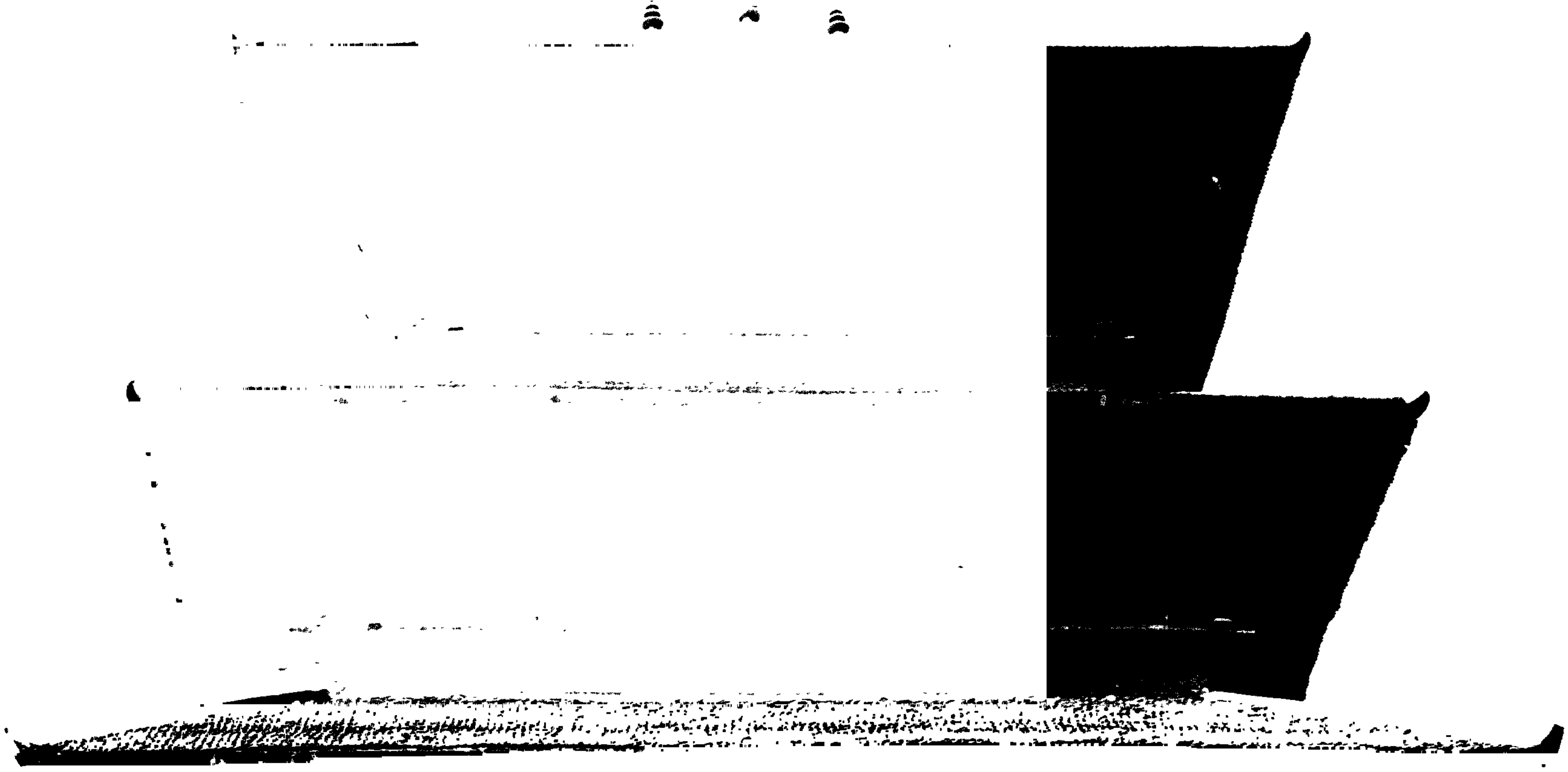
# XI

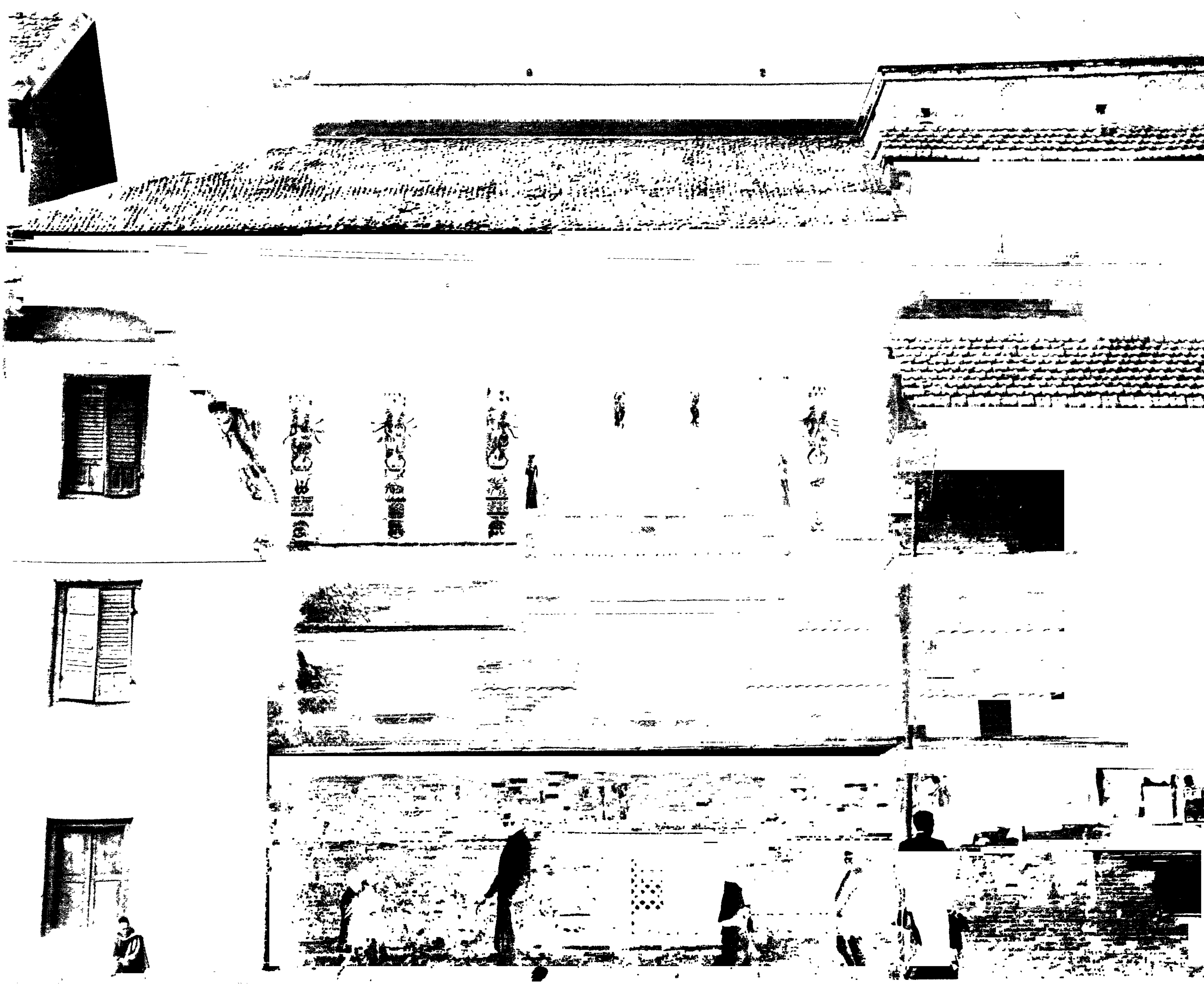
Let us now introduce all these ideas into a country like Nepal, where the native peoples largely escaped the control and the rigours of the Brahmanic law, where they still lived in the simplicity of primitive life, enjoying a licence which was encouraged or directly promoted by their religion, in proximity to countries like the Himalayan regions where the women were permitted extreme freedom, and perhaps near the "kingdom of women" *(strīrājya)* noted for their sensuality, probably in the territory of the Bhotia or related tribes; and among the Bhotia it was the custom to hold regular gatherings to which girls were admitted from the age of ten. We shall not, therefore, be surprised to find that the ideas we have been discussing were taken up enthusiastically in Nepal and indeed carried even farther. At certain times and in certain places, particularly on the borders of Nepal about the 9th and 10th centuries, the obscene allusions contained in the Tantras were taken literally. In these

regions Tantric sects continued to exist after the decadence of Buddhism set in; but the continuity of the spiritual tradition was broken and there were no longer any properly initiated masters to carry out the baptisms which were necessary for those seeking admission to the mysteries of the Tantras. In consequence the sacred texts fell into the hands of laymen, who followed their teachings in the most literal way and so contributed to a general decline in moral standards. At this stage, however, changing historical circumstances led to a renaissance of Buddhism in a purer form, and contact was re-established with the Buddhist schools of Kashmir and the rest of India; and from this period dates a famous letter by a king of western Tibet denouncing the monstrous excesses and the deplorable moral decline of these peoples who, although claiming to be Buddhists, behaved in such a reprehensible manner. Moreover in Nepal the *ars amandi*, already fostered by the general background of religion and manners, had no doubt also been refined by the frequent contacts with Tibet, where it had formed the subject matter of works by a number of writers (including in particular Mi p'am). It may also have come from China—where it had been the subject of particular study since a remote period—in the form of oral tradition, without necessarily finding expression in works of literature.

Another contributory factor was slavery, which had been abolished only fifty years earlier, in the time of Chandra Sham Sher. In this society with its natural freedom of manners and sensuality, and with a religion strongly imbued with Tantric ideas, the existence of slavery promoted a decline in moral standards of which evidence is provided by certain ancient inscriptions. It is not surprising, therefore, to find erotic art, of which we have such notable examples in India, also flourishing in Nepal. Although falling short of the scale and magnificence of the art of Khajuraho and Orissa, the art of Nepal dwells lovingly on erotic representations, frequently including deviant forms of sexual practice. The erotic decorations on these temples in Nepal, which usually date from a later period than the Indian monuments, are the work of craftsmen skilled in the carving of wood or the casting of statues, but without the capacity to achieve the complex compositions and lively plastic patterns of Khajuraho and Orissa. The sculptors who carved the friezes and roof beams of the temples—sometimes graceful enough, though usually executed in rather summary fashion—had an eye for detail rather than for the total effect; but their eroticism, while lacking the unbridled fancy of Indian work, frequently shows a tendency towards deliberate obscenity.

These Nepalese temples raise the same questions in our minds as the temples of India, but pose



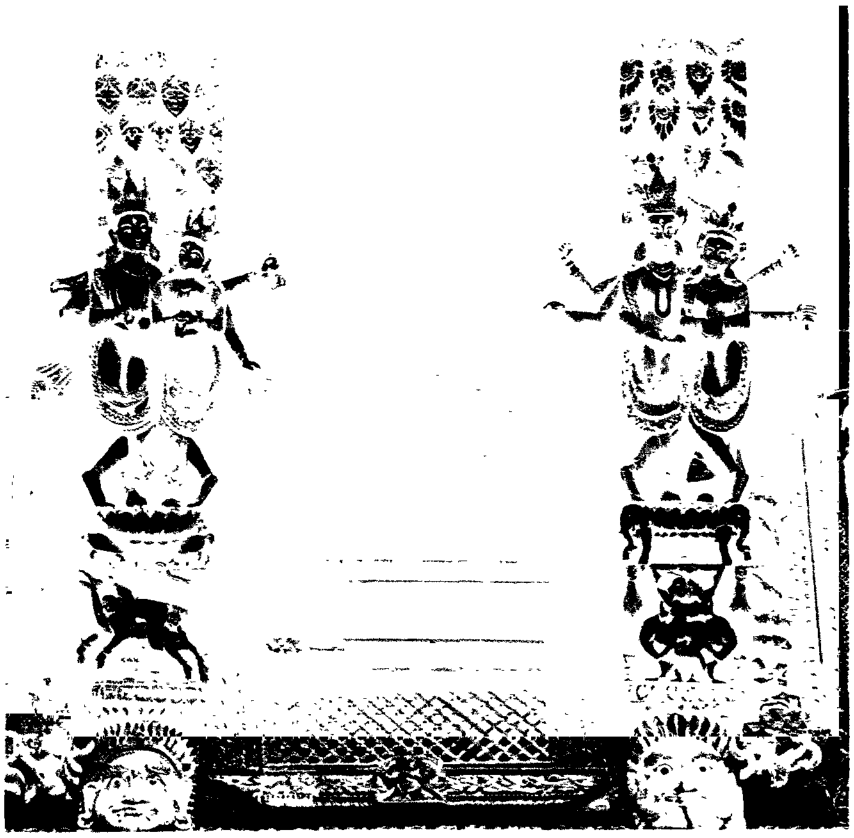


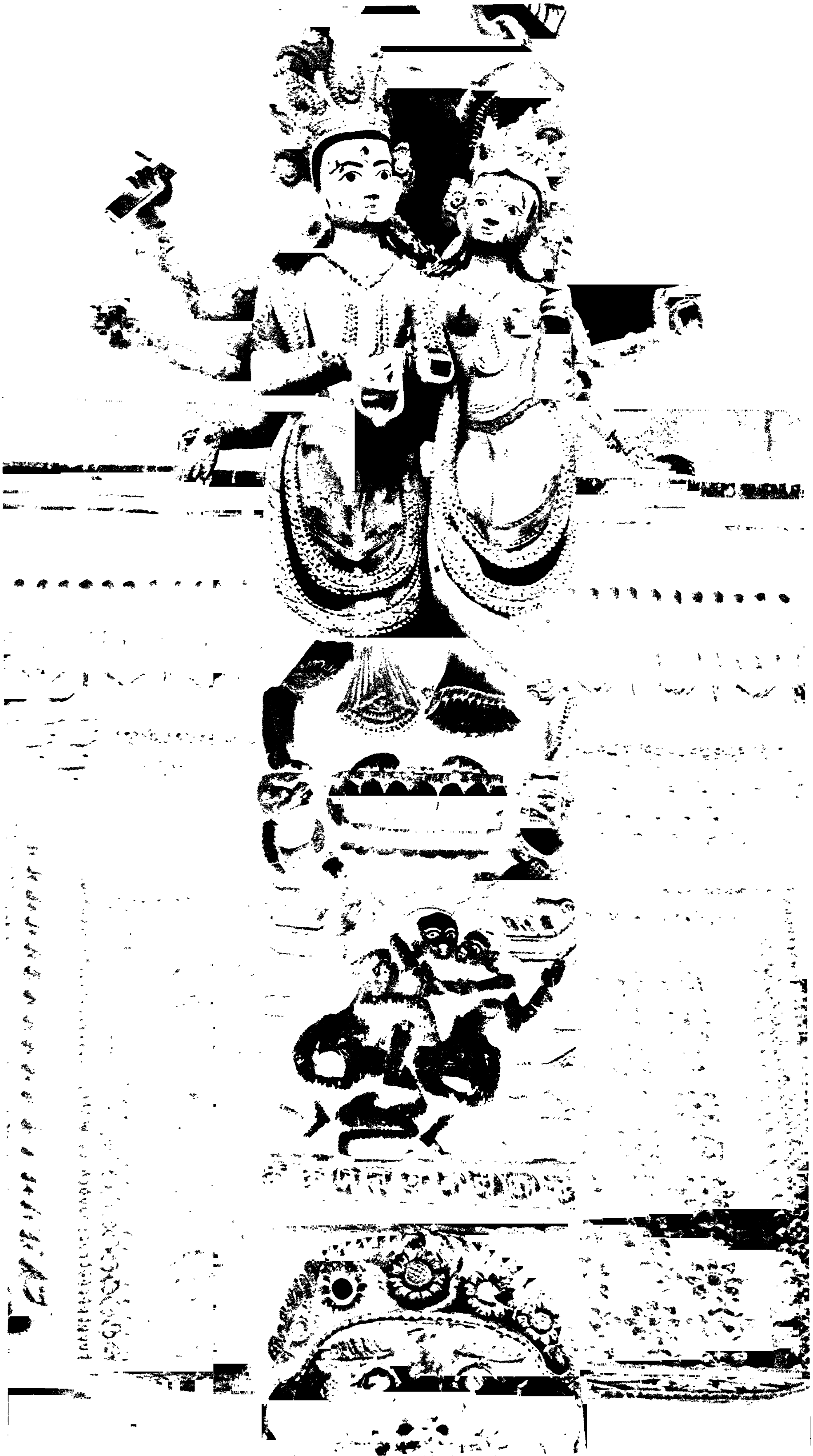




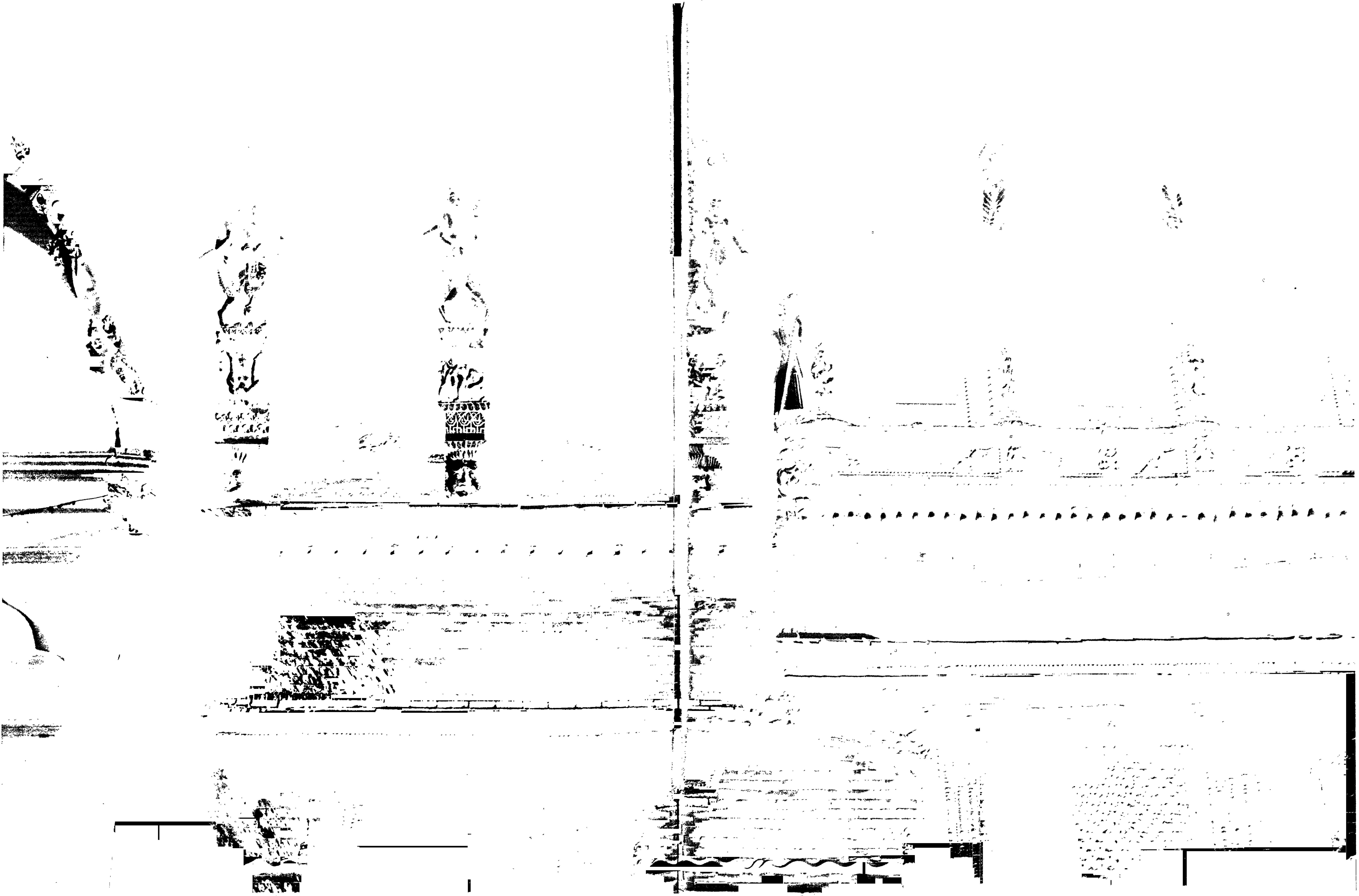
















them even more sharply; for the sculpture with which they are decorated, though distinctly cruder than the Indian work, is not always redeemed by the grace and virtuosity which this displays, and its relative coarseness renders it more frankly and more violently erotic.

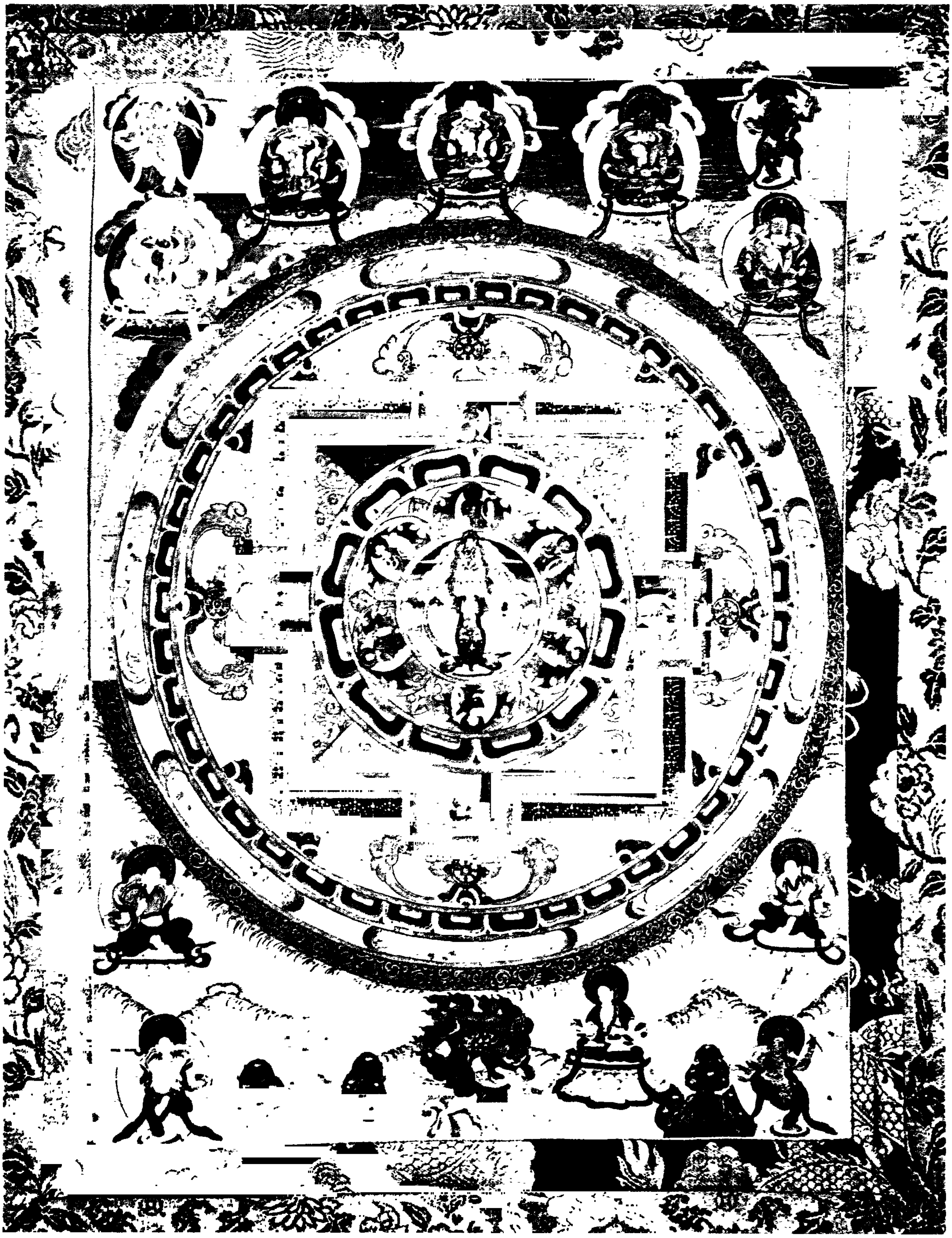
It may seem surprising to find work of this kind on temples, of all places: more particularly since it is an audacious and realistic art, frequently depicting acts which are not directed towards procreation and cannot readily be interpreted as referring to mystical experiences. India and Nepal are not, of course, the only countries where we can find sacred buildings containing works of art which are completely out of keeping with their religious function. Some Catholic churches, indeed, contain decorations of rather equivocal character, discussed by Witkowski in a detailed study to which later work has, I think, added little *(L'Art profane à l'Eglise:* see, for example, the circumcision of an adolescent, ithyphallic Christ in Venice, p. 378, fig. 302 *bis*). In India and Nepal, however, this tendency was carried to extremes, producing work of exaggerated eroticism and some salacity. The tradition, of course, went back a long way. From the time of the Guptas, which may be regarded as the classical period of Indian art and culture, erotic representations *(maithuna)*, although not yet carried to the excess found in later periods, were recommended as guarantees of good fortune and happy augury *(maṅgala)*. Love presupposes an aura of serenity and self-abandonment; and by a transposition which is not difficult to understand amorous embraces are represented on the pilasters of the temples and Buddhist *vihāras*. There are examples of this dating back to the Gāndhāra period, indicative of the state of happy bliss in which the sacred place should be approached. Moreover on the basis of the allegories which we have already discussed the *maithuna* (coupling) is conceived as a symbol of the highest ideal of Hinduism, *mokṣa* (liberation): it suggests another form of union, the mystical union, the reconvergence of the world emanated from God *(prakṛti)* and of God emanating the universe, or in other words the return to the germinal identity.

It might be objected, however, that the orthodox literature contains precise injunctions laying down firmly that no sexual connection shall take place in the vicinity of the sacred places *(caitya)*, nor during the day, the night alone being appropriate for amorous dalliance. Moreover it is explicitly stated in the "normative" works which are the expression of Brahmanic tradition that any amorous act other than one of the regular and permitted acts (i.e., directed towards procreation) is to be practised only when a cosmic era is nearing its end: that is, they are a portent of the destruction of society.

Sexual relations with animals and the practice of cunnilingus carry with them a heavy *karma* which will inevitably bring infinite sorrow in future lives.

However this may be, the erotic representations on temples, particularly the most licentious, have always presented a problem, which has been solved, more or less arbitrarily, in different ways. The Indians themselves, noting the astonishment which they aroused in Western visitors, and not themselves finding any immediately plausible justification—the argument for which would require close familiarity with the religious psychology of India—suggested various arbitrary interpretations to explain such associations between the sacred and the profane—including, for example, the suggestion that they served to protect the temple from lightning. The Sanskrit word for lightning is of the feminine gender, and also means the goddess of thunder; and the theory was evolved, therefore, that it would be unseemly for the goddess (who like all goddesses must be of the perfect age of sixteen—that is, must be a *kumārī*) to touch representations so offensive to her chastity.

This interpretation is clearly invalid and without any basis in reality. Nor is it easy to accept another theory, more carefully argued, put forward by certain scholars who see the current of mystical thought as the predominant factor in India. As I have already noted, there is undoubtedly something in this theory; but clearly it cannot be used to interpret all the representations with which we are here concerned. It has no application, for instance, to the scenes depicting not normal sexual relations but certain aberrations in relation to which any symbolical interpretation is clearly inadmissible.



## XII

We must, therefore, look elsewhere for an explanation; and we must above all give up any idea of finding a single explanation for the vast proliferation of erotic imagery in temples. In fact a number of different explanations suggest themselves; and each of these will be more or less relevant according to the particular case. The possible explanations can, I believe, be reduced to three. We may suppose, in the first place, that just as the sacred books were kept out of profane hands by the kind of expedients which have been described, so the temples were decorated with obscene themes and representations in order to isolate more effectively those who performed the prescribed rites within them. In other words, the deliberate obscenity of the texts, designed to exclude the profane, was reflected in the decorations and representations on the temples. And it is true that these elements are on the outside of the temples, indicating by their presence that the inviolable secret is preserved within the temples; for the temple is the counterpart, the architectural equivalent, of the book and of the experiences which it describes.

The case is different, however, with the figures of Buddhist inspiration, the embracing couples—*yab-yum*, father-mother—of the schools of the Tantric Vehicle. In these the goddess is depicted in the god's embrace, clinging to him with her legs encircling his loins. He is usually represented dancing, the orgiastic violence of the pose being enhanced by the numerous arms brandishing weapons or other instruments. The whole effect is of an amorous embrace at the climax of passion; but the meaning it suggests to the non-initiate is quite different from the sense it conveys to those who understand its symbolism. The initiate know that a reference is intended to the process of passing from one plane

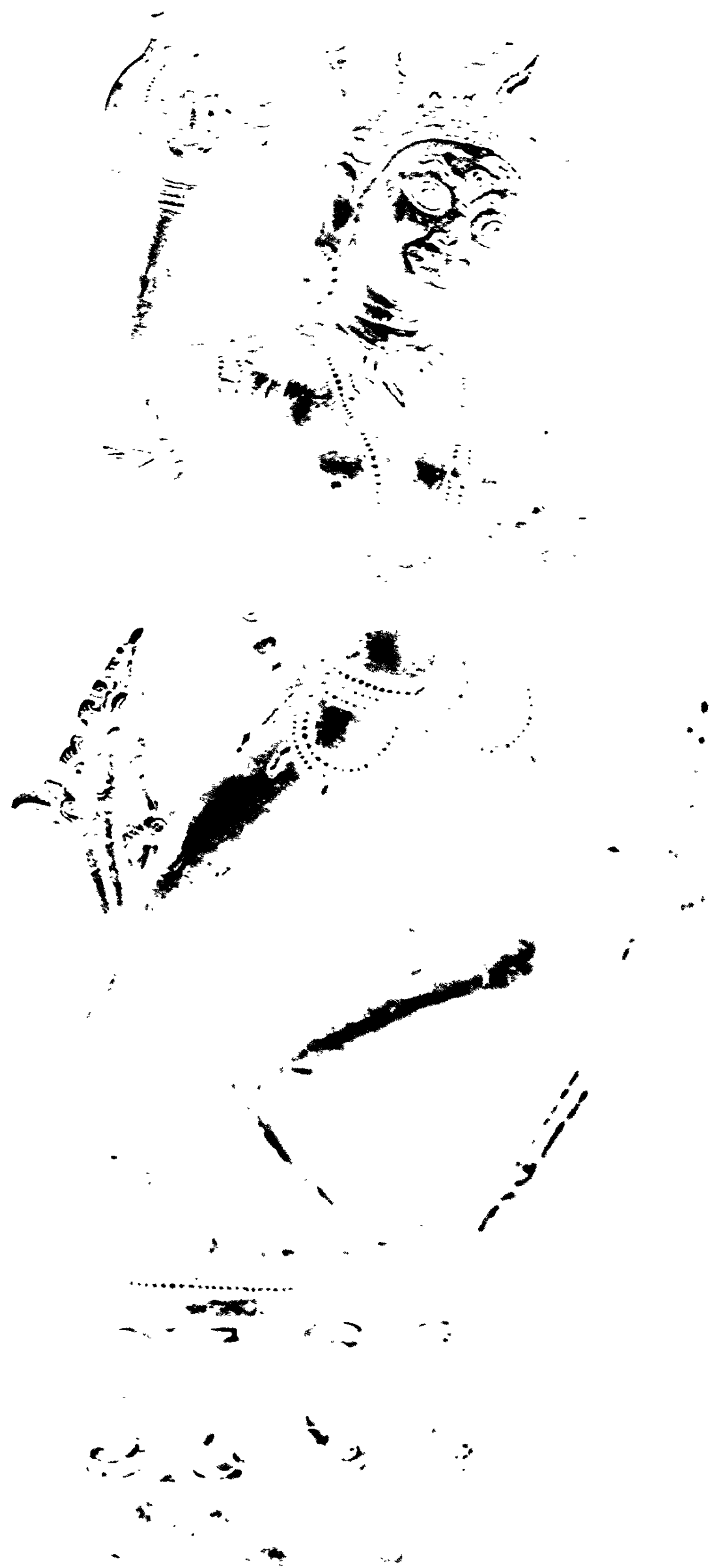


to another which is at the basis of the Tantric gnosis. The way of redemption, or rather of return to the undifferentiated essential consciousness, which is pure light, is represented by the convergence of two inseparable "coefficients". On the one hand is the life of activity directed towards a particular end—the charitable act, the great compassion which impels us to attain the "Thought of Illumination" and to follow the path of the Buddha. This requires us to be concerned not so much for our own good as for that of others; in other words, our sublimation must be put at the service of any who suffer in the illusory world of the *saṃsāra*. All this is symbolised by the "Father", the God who stands for "performance", the active rather than the contemplative life. The goddess, on the other

hand, is the symbol of supreme wisdom *(prajña)*, which coincides with total vacuity: the transcending of the duality of the world of appearances in the undifferentiated translucent luminosity of the undefinable essential Consciousness. These two elements—on the one hand the act, on the other uperior wisdom—are the indispensable "coefficients" of illumination, providing in their conjunction the necessary conditions for redemption on the level of Buddha. Separately they are of no effect: they operate only if both converge towards the same goal.

The thought of illumination *(bodhicitta)*, which is identified with the essential consciousness, springs from the fusion of two "coefficients" in the primal unity, as the seed springs from the embrace. This is the meaning of such images, which recall to the initiate the way which lies ahead of him and the goal which he must seek to attain.

All this was not an innovation introduced by Buddhism, but rather a Buddhist adaption of very ancient ideas which were taken up into the techniques of yoga from very early times. These started from the theory that through the long continued performance of certain exercises it is possible to produce deliberately in man a particular state known as *urdhvaretas*, already known in the time of the Upanishads, in which semen can be made to flow back within the body. This is achieved through a severe discipline—based on the control of breathing, on a particular posture, on meditation, and on autosuggestion—which makes it possible to halt the emission of semen at will. In the context of the esoteric speculations discussed on an earlier page this becomes a means of reconstituting in man the primal androgyne. We find the same idea in the Chinese *ars amandi* based on Taoist premisses which has been so well studied by Van Gulik: in this it is held, more fundamentally, that the mere contact with a woman, even though it is not carried to its full consequences, leads to an enrichment of a man's vitality in so far as it enables him to add to his own being—*yang*, the active male principle, luminosity, the day, the sun—the female principle *yin*, which implies darkness, passivity, the night, the moon. By this means is achieved the balanced unity of both elements, the conjunction of *yin* and *yang* in perfect harmony. The difference between the Indian and Chinese theories is one of emphasis. In India, and consequently also in Nepal, the essential object is to achieve a transcendence of the human, a return, a passage from one plane to another, to avoid a descent into the samsaric world. Here we are reminded also of the theories of the Manichaean schools based on similar rules; for semen is equivalent to light imprisoned in the body and must be kept within it, lest it become



the prey of Ahriman, the god of darkness and of evil. In China, on the other hand, the exercise has a kind of alchemical value: that is, it serves to enhance the vital potency of man and to facilitate the journey into immortality, the supreme objective of the Taoist school. We cannot, however, exclude the possibility that these practices, found in two different countries with certain differences of emphasis, may stem from a common inheritance whose origins are lost in the mists of time. At first designed to serve essentially magico-medical purposes, they were purified and refined through the centuries by the application of the loftiest philosophical concepts.

There is still another theory which can be put forward to explain certain of the scenes represented on the temples of Nepal. If we look carefully at some of the beams supporting the roofs of the so-called "pagodas" of Nepal, the style of which continues ancient traditions of Himalayan architecture, we see that a space is left between the erotic representations and the divinities shown above them; and this gap is sometimes emphasised by a lotus flower carved under the divinity. In the iconography of India, and accordingly of Nepal and Tibet, the lotus signifies spiritual rebirth. It is the usual seat of the divinities, coloured white for the serene divinities and red for the terrifying ones. Under the lotus, according to the Indian system of symbolism, are either the cosmic waters or chaos: that is, the infinite possibility of what exists, or life which is not yet directed towards the passage from one plane to another. Accordingly on the lower level we have human life as it is, with its passions but also with its inborn capacity to achieve its own redemption; on the upper level the divine life; and between the two the symbol of birth into the higher life.

# XIII

In concluding this introduction to the study of the erotic art displayed in the temples of Nepal, therefore, we must bear in mind that the interpretation of this art is a complex matter which cannot be reduced to a single cause or a single source of inspiration.

We note in the first place the quest for a means of recognising and distinguishing certain temples belonging to sects of initiates who sought deliberately to exclude the profane; then we find the symbolism of certain representations of sexual union which, though they might appear unseemly to the ordinary man, were intended to be understood as allusions to the loftiest aspirations towards salvation and to the catharsis through which release could be achieved; and finally there is the judicious use of imagery referring to the distinction between the upper and lower planes. The fact remains, however, that the fundamental tone of this art, its physical realism and even to some extent its very lasciviousness, are indicative of a unique religious experience which meets the menacing presence of death with the affirmation of its opposite—the perpetual renewal of the cycles of life, in virtue of which the great Power which destroys all things is at the same time the power which, continuously and in all eternity, pours itself forth in an inexhaustible process of germination.

For each particular temple, of course, we must select the interpretation which seems most appropriate, while always bearing in mind the interaction of certain constant elements which inspire and pervade the religious experience of the whole of India, together with the systems of thought and morality which are so closely bound up with it. The first of these three constants is the *libido*, which in India assumes a cosmic sense: an impulse which is always and everywhere present and active and

which in its dual forms—Śiva and Śakti, the *liṅga* and *yoni* of the Śaivite schools, the Kriṣṇa and Rādhā of Vaiṣṇavite thought, action and wisdom, the "father" and "mother" of the Buddhist sects—inspires and nourishes some of the most daring religious constructions in the world. Beside this primal and omnipresent *eros* is the shadow of death, *thanatos*. Religious and speculative thought develops round these fundamental themes like a tragic symphony which rarely if ever proceeds at a moderate tempo or in gentle harmonies, but now bursts out into a mood of wild exaltation, now lingers in sombre meditation. Pleasure and sorrow (*sukha* and *duḥkha*), life and death, in reciprocal interrelation, a thesis and antithesis which it seems can never be resolved but run their parallel course in the wondrous web of existence: religion contains both of these elements, and speculative thought provides their justification. In fact *eros* does not exhaust its substance within its being, it is not condemned to remain only and eternally *eros*, but has the capacity for an infinite series of transfigurations which make man—in whom it manifests itself in conscious impulses—a privileged being who sublimates his instinct in redemptive strength. This capacity for "transference" which *eros* enjoys is the third constant which established a bridge from chaos to the divine.

I have used the words *libido* or *eros*, death and *thanatos*, "transference" or transfiguration, as if seeking to interpret in Freudian terms the marvellous structures of Indian religion. It would, however, be wrong to suppose that I have strained the meanings of these terms in order to fit into the patterns of our thought intuitions which are often, at least in appearance, remote from our conception of the world. It would be wrong, because the whole of Indian speculative thought revolves round these three themes, which indeed make up its whole content. They are in fact the archetypes of our own modes of thought. It is the achievement of India to have anticipated, sometimes in confused and uncertain fashion, sometimes with great accuracy and precision, certain ideas which we wrongly claim the credit of having discovered, merely because we have put them into systematic form. The essence of these ideas, however, was present in India almost from the beginning of its glorious record of religious and speculative thought.

# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

*pp. 116–122* *The three Iwala Mai temples at Katmandu. Built in the 19th century, in the reign of Amar-Singh-Tapa, they are dedicated to the goddess Iwala Mai; restored 1966–67. They are private property and are not open to visitors.*

*pp. 125–141* *The Bhajabati Temple at Katmandu. One of the few temples in Nepal with frescoes (another being the temple of Taleju at Bhatgaon). 18th century.*
*The mural paintings in the temple depict Śiva in several of his manifestations, particularly as Durgā (with four arms, with or without a lion), and figures of ascetics.*

*pp. 142–155* *The Nautale Durbar, Katmandu. This nine-storey structure was built by Prithivi Narayan in 1770 and is part of the old royal palace. The palace is still used for important State occasions and for the coronation of the king of Nepal.*

*p. 157* *Tanka. 20th century. Of Tibetan origin. Mandala of Avalokiteśvara surrounded by six Buddhas.*

*p. 159* *Tanka. 20th century. Of Tibetan origin. Mgonpo P'yag bži pa, Nātha with four arms* (yab-yum)*; at top, Samantabhadra.*

*p. 161* *Dākini. Bronze, gilded. Height 31* **cm.**; *width 16 cm. 18th century. Katmandu. Collection of N. Hadji Vassiliou. (Ph. G. Bertin).*
*The dākini are goddesses who attend certain of the Tantric gods-Heruka, Hevajra, etc.*

*Except where otherwise indicated, all the photographs were taken by Lorenz Prinz, Konstanz.*

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